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## BOOKS BY ALLEN TATE

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STONEWALL JACKSON: THE GOOD SOLDIER (1928)

MR. POPE AND OTHER POEMS (1928)

JEFFERSON DAVIS: HIS RISE AND FALL (1929)

THREE POEMS (1930)

POEMS: 1928-1931 (1932)

REACTIONARY ESSAYS ON POETRY AND IDEAS (1936)

THE MEDITERRANEAN AND OTHER POEMS (1936)

SELECTED POEMS (1937)

THE FATHERS (1938)

REASON IN MADNESS (1941)

THE VIGIL OF VENUS (1943)

THE WINTER SEA (1944)

POEMS: 1922-1947 (1948)

# POEMS

1922-1947





# POEMS

1922-1947

BY

ALLEN TATE



*For oft in midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful harlot's curse  
Blasts the newborn infant's ear  
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.*

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1949

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**TO**  
**CAROLINE GORDON**





## NOTE

I considered arranging these poems in the order of their writing but gave it up because I couldn't imagine a reader who would be interested in it. Some of the earliest pieces will be found next to the latest; only a few dates are given. I am not sure I could explain why I think certain poems go with others, in the groups into which the book is divided; at any rate a book of verse in sections is easier to take hold of than an unbroken string of poems. Somewhat more than half of this book appeared as *Selected Poems* in 1937; it contains all of *The Winter Sea* (1944), besides a few poems not collected before.

A. T.



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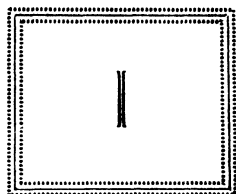
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## THE MEDITERRANEAN

*Quem das finem, rex magne, dolorum?*

Where we went in the boat was a long bay  
A slingshot wide, walled in by towering stone—  
Peaked margin of antiquity's delay,  
And we went there out of time's monotone:

Where we went in the black hull no light moved  
But a gull white-winged along the feckless wave,  
The breeze, unseen but fierce as a body loved,  
That boat drove onward like a willing slave:

Where we went in the small ship the seaweed  
Parted and gave to us the murmuring shore,  
And we made feast and in our secret need  
Devoured the very plates Aeneas bore:

Where derelict you see through the low twilight  
The green coast that you, thunder-tossed, would win,  
Drop sail, and hastening to drink all night  
Eat dish and bowl to take that sweet land in!

## THE MEDITERRANEAN

*Where we feasted and caroused on the sandless  
Pebbles, affecting our day of piracy,*  
What prophecy of eaten plates could landless  
Wanderers fulfil by the ancient sea?

We for that time might taste the famous age  
Eternal here yet hidden from our eyes  
When lust of power undid its stuffless rage;  
They, in a wineskin, bore earth's paradise.

Let us lie down once more by the breathing side  
Of Ocean, where our live forefathers sleep  
As if the Known Sea still were a month wide—  
Atlantis howls but is no longer steep!

What country shall we conquer, what fair land  
Unman our conquest and locate our blood?  
We've cracked the hemispheres with careless hand!  
Now, from the Gates of Hercules we flood

Westward, westward till the barbarous brine  
Whelms us to the tired land where tasseling corn,  
Fat beans, grapes sweeter than muscadine  
Rot on the vine: in that land were we born.

## AENEAS AT WASHINGTON

I myself saw furious with blood  
Neoptolemus, at his side the black Atridae,  
Hecuba and the hundred daughters, Priam  
Cut down, his filth drenching the holy fires.  
In that extremity I bore me well,  
A true gentleman, valorous in arms,  
Disinterested and honourable. Then fled:  
That was a time when civilization  
Run by the few fell to the many, and  
Crashed to the shout of men, the clang of arms:  
Cold victualing I seized, I hoisted up  
The old man my father upon my back,  
In the smoke made by sea for a new world  
Saving little—a mind imperishable  
If time is, a love of past things tenuous  
As the hesitation of receding love.

(To the reduction of uncitied littorals  
We brought chiefly the vigor of prophecy,  
Our hunger breeding calculation  
And fixed triumphs)

AENEAS AT WASHINGTON

I saw the thirsty dove  
In the glowing fields of Troy, hemp ripening  
And tawny corn, the thickening Blue Grass  
All lying rich forever in the green sun.  
I see all things apart, the towers that men  
Contrive I too contrived long, long ago.  
Now I demand little. The singular passion  
Abides its object and consumes desire  
In the circling shadow of its appetite.  
There was a time when the young eyes were slow,  
Their flame steady beyond the firstling fire,  
I stood in the rain, far from home at nightfall  
By the Potomac, the great Dome lit the water,  
The city my blood had built I knew no more  
While the screech-owl whistled his new delight  
Consecutively dark.

Stuck in the wet mire  
Four thousand leagues from the ninth buried city  
I thought of Troy, what we had built her for.

## TO THE ROMANTIC TRADITIONISTS

I have looked at them long,  
My eyes blur; sourceless light  
Keeps them forever young  
Before our ageing sight.

You see them too—strict forms  
Of will, the secret dignity  
Of our dissolute storms;  
They grow too bright to be.

What were they like? What mark  
Can signify their charm?  
They never saw the dark;  
Rigid, they never knew alarm.

Do not the scene rehearse!  
The perfect eyes enjoin  
A contemptuous verse;  
We speak the crabbed line.

TO THE ROMANTIC TRADITIONISTS

Immaculate race! to yield  
Us final knowledge set  
In a cold frieze, a field  
Of war but no blood let.

Are they quite willing,  
Do they ask to pose,  
Naked and simple, chilling  
The very wind's nose?

They ask us how to live!  
We answer: Again try  
Being the drops we sieve.  
What death it is to die!

Therefore because they nod,  
Being too full of us,  
I look at the turned sod  
Where it is perilous

And yawning all the same  
As if we knew them not  
And history had no name—  
No need to name the spot!

## THE ANCESTORS

When the night's coming and the last light falls ·  
A weak child among lost shadows on the floor,  
It is your listening: pulse heeds the strain  
Of fore and after, wind shivers the door.  
What masterful delay commands the blood  
Breaking its access to the living heart?  
Consider this, the secret indecision,  
Not rudeness of time but the systaltic flood  
Of ancient failure begging its new start:  
The flickered pause between the day and night  
(When the heart knows its informality)  
The bones hear but the eyes will never see—  
Punctilious abyss, the yawn of space  
Come once a day to suffocate the sight.  
There is no man on earth who can be free  
Of this, the eldest in the latest crime.

## MESSAGE FROM ABROAD

To Andrew Lytle

Paris, November 1929

*Their faces are bony and sharp but very red, although their ancestors nearly two hundred years have dwelt by the miasmal banks of tidewaters where malarial fever makes men gaunt and dosing with quinine shakes them as with a palsy.—Traveller to America (1799).*

### I

What years of the other times, what centuries  
Broken, divided up and claimed? A few  
Here and there to the taste, in vigilance  
Ceaseless, but now a little stale, to keep us  
Fearless, not worried as the hare scurrying  
Without memory . . .

Provence,  
The Renaissance, the age of Pericles, each  
A broad, rich-carpeted stair to pride  
With manhood now the cost—they're easy to follow

## MESSAGE FROM ABROAD

For the ways taken are all notorious,  
Lettered, sculptured, and rhymed;  
Those others, incuriously complete, lost,  
Not by poetry and statues timed,  
Shattered by sunlight and the impartial sleet.  
What years . . . What centuries . . .

Now only

The bent eaves and the windows cracked,  
The thin grass picked by the wind,  
Heaved by the mole; the hollow pine that  
Screams in the latest storm—these,  
These emblems of twilight have we seen at length,  
And the man red-faced and tall seen, leaning  
In the day of his strength  
Not as a pine, but the stiff form  
Against the west pillar,  
Hearing the ox-cart in the street—  
His shadow gliding, a long nigger  
Gliding at his feet.

II

Wanderers to the east, wanderers west:  
I followed the cold northern track,  
The sleet sprinkled the sea;  
The dim foam mounted  
The night, the ship mounted  
The depths of night—  
How absolute the sea!

With dawn came the gull to the crest,  
Stared at the spray, fell asleep  
Over the picked bones, the white face  
Of the leaning man drowned deep;

The red-faced man, ceased wandering,  
Never came to the boulevards  
Nor covertly spat in the sawdust  
Sunk in his collar  
Shuffling the cards;

The man with the red face, the stiff back,  
I cannot see in the rainfall  
Down Saint-Michel by the quays,  
At the corner the wind speaking  
Destiny, the four ways.

III

I cannot see you  
The incorruptibles,  
Yours was a secret fate,  
The stiff-backed liars, the dupes:  
The universal blue  
Of heaven rots,  
Your anger is out of date—  
What did you say mornings?  
Evenings, what?  
The bent eaves  
On the cracked house,  
That ghost of a hound. . . .  
The man red-faced and tall  
Will cast no shadow  
From the province of the drowned.

## TO THE LACEDEMONIANS

*An old soldier on the night before the veterans' reunion talks partly to himself, partly to imaginary comrades:*

The people—people of my kind, my own  
People but strange with a white light  
In the face: the streets hard with motion  
And the hard eyes that look one way.  
Listen! the high whining tone  
Of the motors, I hear the dull commotion:  
I am come, a child in an old play.

I am here with a secret in the night;  
Because I am here the dead wear gray.

It is a privilege to be dead; for you  
Cannot know what absence is nor seize  
The ordour of pure distance until  
From you, slowly dying in the head,  
All sights and sounds of the moment, all  
The life of sweet intimacy shall fall  
Like a swift at dusk.

TO THE LACEDEMONIANS

Sheer time! Stroke of the heart  
Towards retirement. . . .

Gentlemen, my secret is  
Damnation: where have they, the citizens, all  
Come from? They were not born in my father's  
House, nor in their fathers': on a street corner  
By motion sired, not born; by rest dismayed.  
The tempest will unwind—the hurricane  
Consider, knowing its end, the headlong pace?  
I have watched it and endured it, I have delayed  
Judgment: it warn't in my time, by God, so  
That the mere breed absorbed the generation!

Yet I, hollow head, do see but little;  
Old man: no memory: aimless distractions.

I was a boy, I never knew cessation  
Of the bright course of blood along the vein;  
Moved, an old dog by me, to field and stream  
In the speaking ease of the fall rain;  
When I was a boy the light on the hills  
Was there because I could see it, not because  
Some special gift of God had put it there.

TO THE LACEDEMONIANS

Men expect too much, do too little,  
Put the contraption before the accomplishment,  
Lack skill of the interior mind  
To fashion dignity with shapes of air.  
Luxury, yes—but not elegance!  
Where have they come from?

Go you tell them  
That we their servants, well-trained, gray-coated  
And haired (both foot and horse) or in  
The grave, them obey . . . obey them,  
What commands?

My father said  
That everything but kin was less than kind.  
The young men like swine argue for a rind,  
A flimsy shell to put their weakness in;  
Will-less, ruled by what they cannot see;  
Hunched like savages in a rotten tree  
They wait for the thunder to speak: Union!  
That joins their separate fear.

I fought  
But did not care; a leg shot off at Bethel,  
Given up for dead; but knew neither shell-shock

TO THE LACEDEMONIANS

Nor any self-indulgence. Well may war be  
Terrible to those who have nothing to gain  
For the illumination of the sense:

When the peace is a trade route, figures  
For the budget, reduction of population,  
Life grown sullen and immense  
Lusts after immunity to pain.

There is no civilization without death;  
There is now the wind for breath.

Waken, lords and ladies gay, we cried,  
And marched to Cedar Run and Malvern Hill,  
Kinsmen and friends from Texas to the Tide—  
Vain chivalry of the personal will!

Waken, we shouted, lords and ladies gay,  
We go to win the precincts of the light,  
Unshadowing restriction of our day. . . .  
Regard now, in the seventy years of night,

Them, the young men who watch us from the curbs:  
They hold the glaze of wonder in their stare—  
Our crooked backs, hands fetid as old herbs,  
The tallow eyes, wax face, the foreign hair!

TO THE LACEDEMONIANS

Soldiers, march! we shall not fight again  
The Yankees with our guns well-aimed and rammed—  
All are born Yankees of the race of men  
And this, too, now the country of the damned:

Poor bodies crowding round us! The white face  
Eyeless with eyesight only, the modern power—  
Huddled sublimities of time and space,  
They are the echoes of a raging tower

That reared its moment upon a gone land,  
Pquring a long cold wrath into the mind—  
Damned souls, running the way of sand  
Into the destination of the wind!

## ODE TO THE CONFEDERATE DEAD

Row after row with strict impunity  
The headstones yield their names to the element,  
The wind whirrs without recollection;  
In the riven troughs the splayed leaves  
Pile up, of nature the casual sacrament  
To the seasonal eternity of death;  
Then driven by the fierce scrutiny  
Of heaven to their election in the vast breath,  
They sough the rumour of mortality.

Autumn is desolation in the plot  
Of a thousand acres where these memories grow  
From the inexhaustible bodies that are not  
Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row.  
Think of the autumns that have come and gone!—  
Ambitious November with the humors of the year,  
With a particular zeal for every slab,  
Staining the uncomfortable angels that rot  
On the slabs, a wing chipped here, an arm there:  
The brute curiosity of an angel's stare

ODE TO THE CONFEDERATE DEAD

Turns you, like them, to stone,  
Transforms the heaving air  
Till plunged to a heavier world below  
You shift your sea-space blindly  
Heaving, turning like the blind crab.

Dazed by the wind, only the wind  
The leaves flying, plunge

You know who have waited by the wall  
The twilight certainty of an animal,  
Those midnight restitutions of the blood  
You know—the immitigable pines, the smoky frieze  
Of the sky, the sudden call: you know the rage,  
The cold pool left by the mounting flood,  
Of muted Zeno and Parmenides.  
You who have waited for the angry resolution  
Of those desires that should be yours tomorrow,  
You know the unimportant shrift of death  
And praise the vision  
And praise the arrogant circumstance  
Of those who fall  
Rank upon rank, hurried beyond decision—  
Here by the sagging gate, stopped by the wall.

ODE TO THE CONFEDERATE DEAD

Seeing, seeing only the leaves  
Flying, plunge and expire

Turn your eyes to the immoderate past,  
Turn to the inscrutable infantry rising  
Demons out of the earth—they will not last.  
Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp,  
Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run.  
Lost in that orient of the thick-and-fast  
You will curse the setting sun.

Cursing only the leaves crying  
Like an old man in a storm

You hear the shout, the crazy hemlocks point  
With troubled fingers to the silence which  
Smothers you, a mummy, in time.

The hound bitch  
Toothless and dying, in a musty cellar  
Hears the wind only.

Now that the salt of their blood  
Stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea,  
Seals the malignant purity of the flood,

## ODE TO THE CONFEDERATE DEAD

What shall we who count our days and bow  
Our heads with a commemorial woe  
In the ribboned coats of grim felicity,  
What shall we say of the bones, unclean,  
Whose verdurous anonymity will grow?  
The ragged arms, the ragged heads and eyes  
Lost in these acres of the insane green?  
The gray lean spiders come, they come and go;  
In a tangle of willows without light  
The singular screech-owl's tight  
Invisible lyric seeds the mind  
With the furious murmur of their chivalry.

We shall say only the leaves  
Flying, plunge and expire

We shall say only the leaves whispering  
In the improbable mist of nightfall  
That flies on multiple wing;  
Night is the beginning and the end  
And in between the ends of distraction  
Waits mute speculation, the patient curse  
That stones the eyes, or like the jaguar leaps  
For his own image in a jungle pool, his victim.

ODE TO THE CONFEDERATE DEAD

What shall we say who have knowledge  
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act  
To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the  
grave  
In the house? The ravenous grave?

Leave now  
The shut gate and the decomposing wall:  
The gentle serpent, green in the mulberry bush,  
Riots with his tongue through the hush—  
Sentinel of the grave who counts us all!







## SEASONS OF THE SOUL

To the memory of John Peale Bishop, 1892-1944

*Allor porsi la mano un poco avante,  
e colsi un ramicel da un gran pruno;  
e il tronco suo gridò: Perchè mi schiante?*

### I. SUMMER

Summer, this is our flesh,  
The body you let mature;  
If now while the body is fresh  
You take it, shall we give  
The heart, lest heart endure  
The mind's tattering  
Blow of greedy claws?  
Shall mind itself still live  
If like a hunting king  
It falls to the lion's jaws?

## SEASONS OF THE SOUL

Under the summer's blast  
The soul cannot endure  
Unless by sleight or fast  
It seize or deny its day  
To make the eye secure.  
Brothers-in-arms, remember  
The hot wind dries and draws  
With circular delay  
The flesh, ash from the ember,  
Into the summer's jaws.

It was a gentle sun  
When, at the June solstice  
Green France was overrun  
With caterpillar feet.  
No head knows where its rest is  
Or may lie down with reason  
When war's usurping claws  
Shall take the heart escheat—  
Green field in burning season  
To stain the weevil's jaws.

## SEASONS OF THE SOUL

The southern summer dies  
Evenly in the fall:  
We raise our tired eyes  
Into a sky of glass,  
Blue, empty, and tall  
Without tail or head  
Where burn the equal laws  
For Balaam and his ass  
Above the invalid dead,  
Who cannot lift their jaws.

When was it that the summer  
(Daylong a liquid light)  
And a child, the new-comer,  
Bathed in the same green spray,  
Could neither guess the night?  
The summer had no reason;  
Then, like a primal cause  
It had its timeless day  
Before it kept the season  
Of time's engaging jaws.

## SEASONS OF THE SOUL

Two men of our summer world  
Descended winding hell  
And when their shadows curled  
They fearfully confounded  
The vast concluding shell:  
Stopping, they saw in the narrow  
Light a centaur pause  
And gaze, then his astounded  
Beard, with a notched arrow,  
Part back upon his jaws.

## II. AUTUMN

It had an autumn smell  
And that was how I knew  
That I was down a well:  
I was no longer young;  
My lips were numb and blue,  
The air was like fine sand  
In a butcher's stall  
Or pumice to the tongue:  
And when I raised my hand  
I stood in the empty hall.

SEASONS OF THE SOUL

The round ceiling was high  
And the gray light like shale  
Thin, crumbling, and dry:  
No rug on the bare floor  
Nor any carved detail  
To which the eye could glide;  
I counted along the wall  
Door after closed door  
Through which a shade might slide  
To the cold and empty hall.

I will leave this house, I said,  
There is the autumn weather—  
Here, nor living nor dead;  
The lights burn in the town  
Where men fear together.  
Then on the bare floor,  
But tiptoe lest I fall,  
I walked years down  
Towards the front door  
At the end of the empty hall.

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Towards the front door  
At the end of the empty hall.

SEASONS OF THE SOUL

The door was false—no key  
Or lock, and I was caught  
In the house; yet I could see  
I had been born to it  
For miles of running brought  
Me back where I began.  
I saw now in the wall  
A door open a slit  
And a fat grizzled man  
Come out into the hall:

As in a moonlit street  
Men meeting are too shy  
To check their hurried feet  
But raise their eyes and squint  
As through a needle's eye  
Into the faceless gloom,—  
My father in a gray shawl  
Gave me an unseeing glint  
And entered another room!  
I stood in the empty hall

### SEASONS OF THE SOUL

And watched them come and go  
From one room to another,  
Old men, old women—slow,  
Familiar; girls, boys;  
I saw my downcast mother  
Clad in her street-clothes,  
Her blue eyes long and small,  
Who had no look or voice  
For him whose vision froze  
Him in the empty hall.

### III. WINTER

Goddess sea-born and bright,  
Return into the sea  
Where eddying twilight  
Gathers upon your people—  
Cold goddess, hear our plea!  
Leave the burnt earth, Venus,  
For the drying God above,  
Hanged in his windy steeple,  
No longer bears for us  
The living wound of love.

All the sea-gods are dead.  
You, Venus, come home  
To your salt maidenhead,  
The tossed anonymous sea  
Under shuddering foam—  
Shade for lovers, where  
A shark swift as your dove  
Shall pace our company  
All night to nudge and tear  
The livid wound of love.

And now the winter sea:  
Within her hollow rind  
What sleek facility  
Of sea-conceited scop  
To plumb the nether mind!  
Eternal winters' blow  
Shivering flakes, and shove  
Bodies that wheel and drop—  
Cold soot upon the snow  
Their livid wound of love.

## SEASONS OF THE SOUL

Beyond the undertow  
The gray sea-foliage  
Transpires a phosphor glow  
Into the circular miles:  
In the centre of his cage  
The pacing animal  
Surveys the jungle cove  
And slicks his slithering wiles  
To turn the venereal awl  
In the livid wound of love.

Beyond the undertow  
The rigid madrepore  
Resists the winter's flow—  
Headless, unageing oak  
That gives the leaf no more.  
Wilfully as I stood  
Within the thickest grove  
I seized a branch, which broke;  
I heard the speaking blood  
(From the livid wound of love)

## SEASONS OF THE SOUL

Drip down upon my toe:  
"We are the men who died  
Of self-inflicted woe,  
Lovers whose stratagem  
Led to their suicide."  
I touched my sanguine hair  
And felt it drip above  
Their brother who, like them,  
Was maimed and did not bear  
The living wound of love.

### IV. SPRING

Irritable spring, infuse  
Into the burning breast  
Your combustible juice  
That as a liquid soul  
Shall be the body's guest  
Who lights, but cannot stay  
To comfort this unease  
Which, like a dying coal,  
Hastens the cooler day  
Of the mother of silences.

## SEASONS OF THE SOUL

Back in my native prime  
I saw the orient corn  
All space but no time,  
Reaching for the sun  
Of the land where I was born:  
It was a pleasant land  
Where even death could please  
Us with an ancient pun—  
All dying for the hand  
Of the mother of silences.

In time of bloody war  
Who will know the time?  
Is it a new spring star  
Within the timing chill,  
Talking, or just a mime,  
That rises in the blood—  
Thin Jack-and-Jillling seas  
Without the human will?  
Its light is at the flood,  
Mother of silences!

## SEASONS OF THE SOUL

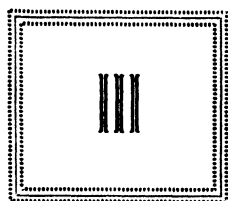
It burns us each alone  
Whose burning arrogance  
Burns up the rolling stone,  
This earth—Platonic cave  
Of vertiginous chance!  
Come, tired Sisyphus,  
Cover the cave's egress  
Where light reveals the slave,  
Who rests when sleeps with us  
The mother of silences.

Come, old woman, save  
Your sons who have gone down  
Into the burning cave:  
Come, mother, and lean  
At the window with your son  
And gaze through its light frame  
These fifteen centuries  
Upon the shirking scene  
Where men, blind, go lame:  
Then, mother of silences,

SEASONS OF THE SOUL

Speak, that we may hear;  
Listen, while we confess  
That we conceal our fear;  
Regard us, while the eye  
Discerns by sight or guess  
Whether, as sheep foregather  
Upon their crooked knees,  
We have begun to die;  
Whether your kindness, mother,  
Is mother of silences.







## RECORDS

### I. A DREAM

At nine years a sickly boy lay down  
At bedtime on a cot by mother's bed  
And as the two darks merged the room became  
So strange it left the boy half dead:

The boy-man on the Ox Road walked along  
The man he was to be and yet another,  
It seemed the grandfather of his mother,  
In knee-breeches silver-buckled like a song,  
His hair long and a cocked hat on his head,  
A straight back and slow dignity for stride;  
The road, red clay sun-cracked and baked,  
Led fearlessly through scrub pines on each side  
Hour after hour—the old road cracked and burned,  
The trees countless, and his thirst unslaked.  
Yet steadily with discipline like fate  
Without memory, too ancient to be learned,  
The man walked on and as if it were yesterday  
Came easily to a two-barred gate

## RECORDS

And stopped, and peering over a little way  
He saw a dog-run country store fallen-in,  
Deserted, but he said, "Who's there?"  
And then a tall fat man with stringy hair  
And a manner that was innocent of sin,  
His galluses greasy, his eyes coldly gray,  
Appeared, and with a gravely learned air  
Spoke from the deep coherence of hell—  
The pines thundered, the sky blacked away,  
The man in breeches, all knowledge in his stare,  
A moment shuddered as the world fell.

## II. A VISION

At twenty years the strong boy walked alone  
Most fashionably dressed in the deserted park  
At midnight, where the far lights burned low  
And summer insects whined with little tone.  
There was a final and comfortable dark  
So that he walked deliberately slow;  
It was not far from home, he'd been to see  
His girl, who had sat silent and alone.  
Picking his way upon the patched brick walk,  
It being less dark near the street, he hastened

## RECORDS

And knew a sense of fine immediacy  
And then he heard some old forgotten talk  
At a short distance like a hundred miles  
Filling the air with its secrecy,  
And was afraid of all the living air:  
Now between steps with one heel lifted  
A stern command froze him to the spot  
And then a tall thin man with stringy hair,  
Fear in his eyes, his breath quick and hot,  
His arms lank and his neck a little twisted,  
Spoke, and the trees sifted the air:  
"I'm growing old," he said, "you have no choice,"  
And said no more, but his bright eyes insisted  
Incalculably with his relentless voice.

## MOTHER AND SON

Now all day long the man who is not dead  
Hastens the dark with inattentive eyes,  
The woman with white hand and erect head  
Stares at the covers, leans for the son's replies  
At last to her importunate womanhood—  
Her hand of death laid on the living bed;  
So lives the fierce compositor of blood.

She waits; he lies upon the bed of sin  
Where greed, avarice, anger writhed and slept  
Till to their silence they were gathered in:  
There, fallen with time, his tall and bitter kin  
Once fired the passions that were never kept  
In the permanent heart, and there his mother lay  
To bear him on the impenetrable day.

The falcon mother cannot will her hand  
Up to the bed, nor break the manacle  
His exile sets upon her harsh command  
That he should say the time is beautiful—  
Transfigured by her own possessing light:  
The sick man craves the impalpable night.

## MOTHER AND SON

Loosed betwixt eye and lid, the swimming beams  
Of memory, blind school of cuttlefish,  
Rise to the air, plunge to the cold streams—  
Rising and plunging the half-forgotten wish  
To tear his heart out in a slow disgrace  
And freeze the hue of terror to her face.

Hate, misery, and fear beat off his heart  
To the dry fury of the woman's mind;  
The son, prone in his autumn, moves apart  
A seed blown upon a returning wind.  
O child, be vigilant till towards the south  
On the flowered wall all the sweet afternoon,  
The reaching sun, swift as the cottonmouth,  
Strikes at the black crucifix on her breast  
Where the cold dusk comes suddenly to rest—  
Mortality will speak the victor soon!

The dreary flies, lazy and casual,  
Stick to the ceiling, buzz along the wall.  
O heart, the spider shuffles from the mould  
Weaving, between the pinks and grapes, his pall.  
The bright wallpaper, imperishably old,  
Uncurls and flutters, it will never fall.

## THE PARADIGM

For when they meet, the tensile air  
Like fine steel strains under the weight  
Of messages that both hearts bear—  
Pure passion once, now purest hate;

Till the taut air like a cold hand  
Clasped to cold hand and bone to bone  
Seals them up in their icy land  
(A few square feet) where into stone

The two hearts turning quickly pass  
Once more their impenetrable world;  
So fades out each heart's looking-glass  
Whose image is the surface hurled

By all the air; air, glass is not;  
So is their fleeting enmity  
Like a hard mirror crashed by what  
The quality of air must be.

## THE PARADIGM

For in the air all lovers meet  
After they've hated out their love;  
Love's but the echo of retreat  
Caught by the sunbeam stretched above

Their frozen exile from the earth  
And lost. Each is the other's crime.  
This is their equity in birth—  
Hate is its ignorant paradigm.

## SONNETS AT CHRISTMAS

(1934)

### I

This is the day His hour of life draws near,  
Let me get ready from head to foot for it  
Most handily with eyes to pick the year  
For small feed to reward a feathered wit.  
Some men would see it an epiphany  
At ease, at food and drink, others at chase  
Yet I, stung lassitude, with ecstasy  
Unspent argue the season's difficult case  
So: Man, dull critter of enormous head,  
What would he look at in the coiling sky?  
But I must kneel again unto the Dead  
While Christmas bells of paper white and red,  
Figured with boys and girls spilt from a sled,  
Ring out the silence I am nourished by.

## II

Ah, Christ, I love you rings to the wild sky  
And I must think a little of the past:  
When I was ten I told a stinking lie  
That got a black boy whipped; but now at last  
The going years, caught in an accurate glow,  
Reverse like balls englished upon green baize—  
Let them return, let the round trumpets blow  
The ancient crackle of the Christ's deep gaze.  
Deafened and blind, with senses yet unfound,  
Am I, untutored to the after-wit  
Of knowledge, knowing a nightmare has no sound;  
Therefore with idle hands and head I sit  
In late December before the fire's daze  
Punished by crimes of which I would be quit.

## MORE SONNETS AT CHRISTMAS

(1942)

To Denis Devlin

### I

Again the native hour lets down the locks  
Uncombed and black, but gray the bobbing beard;  
Ten years ago His eyes, fierce shuttlecocks,  
Pierced the close net of what I failed: I feared  
The belly-cold, the grave-clout, that betrayed  
Me dithering in the drift of cordial seas;  
Ten years are time enough to be dismayed  
By mummy Christ, head crammed between his  
knees.

Suppose I take an arrogant bomber, stroke  
By stroke, up to the frazzled sun to hear  
Sun-ghostlings whisper: Yes, the capital yoke—  
Remove it and there's not a ghost to fear  
This crucial day, whose decapitate joke  
Languidly winds into the inner ear.

II

The day's at end and there's nowhere to go,  
Draw to the fire, even this fire is dying;  
Get up and once again politely lying  
Invite the ladies toward the mistletoe  
With greedy eyes that stare like an old crow.  
How pleasantly the holly wreaths did hang  
And how stuffed Santa did his reindeer clang  
Above the golden oaken mantel, years ago!

Then hang this picture for a calendar,  
As sheep for goat, and pray most fixedly  
For the cold martial progress of your star,  
With thoughts of commerce and society,  
Well-milked Chinese, Negroes who cannot sing,  
The Huns gelded and feeding in a ring.

## MORE SONNETS AT CHRISTMAS

### III

Give me this day a faith not personal,  
As follows: The American people fully armed  
With assurance policies, righteous and harmed,  
Battle the world of which they're not at all.  
That lying boy of ten who stood in the hall,  
His hat in hand (thus by his father charmed:  
"You may be President"), was not alarmed  
Nör even left uneasy by his fall.

Nobody said that he could be a plumber,  
Carpenter, clerk, bus-driver, bombardier;  
Let little boys go into violent slumber,  
Aegean squall and squalor where their fear  
Is of an enemy in remote oceans  
Unstalked by Christ: these are the better notions.

IV

Gay citizen, myself, and thoughtful friend,  
Your ghosts are Plato's Christians in the cave.  
Unfix your necks, turn to the door; the nave  
Gives back the cheated and light dividend  
So long sequestered; now, new-rich, you'll spend  
Flesh for reality inside a stone  
Whose light obstruction, like a gossamer bone,  
Dead or still living, will not break or bend.

Thus light, your flesh made pale and sinister  
And put off like a dog that's had his day,  
You will be Plato's kept philosopher,  
Albino man bleached from the mortal clay,  
Mild-mannered, gifted in your master's ease  
While the sun squats upon the waveless seas.

## FALSE NIGHTMARE

"I give the yawp barbaric  
Of piety and pelf  
(Who now reads Herrick?)

"And contradict myself—  
No matter, the verse is large.  
My five-and-ten cent shelf

"The continent is: my targe  
Bigger than Greece. The shock  
Of Me exceeds its marge—

"Myself the old cock  
With wind and water wild  
(Hell with the privy lock):

"I have no woman child;  
Onan-Amurikee  
My son, alone, beguiled

"By my complacency  
In priggery to slay  
My blind posterity . . ."

FALSE NIGHTMARE

—These words, at dawn of day  
In the sleep-awakened mind,  
I made Walt Whitman say:

Wherefore I and my kind  
Wear meekly in the face  
A pale honeydew rind

Of rotten-sweet grace;  
Ungracefully doating  
Great-aunts hanged in lace

We are: mildly gloating  
Dog bones in a trunk  
Saved in the attic. . . .

*Floating*

*Hating king and monk,  
The classes and the mass,  
We chartered an old junk*

*(Like Jesus on his ass)  
Unto the smutty corn  
And smirking sassafras.*

## FALSE NIGHTMARE

In bulled Europa's morn  
We love our land because  
All night we raped her—torn,

Blue grass and glade. Jackdaws,  
Buzzards and crows the land  
Love with prurient claws;

So may I cunning my hand  
To clip the increment  
From the land or quicksand;

For unto us God sent  
To gloze with iron bonds  
The dozing continent—

The fallow graves, ponds  
Full of limp fish, tall  
Terrains, fields and fronds  
Through which we crawl, and call.

# JUBILO

To Arthur Mizener

*Hit mus' be now de Kingdom comin'  
And de year of Jubilo . . .*

Tail-spinning from the shelves of sky  
See how it dips and tacks and tosses  
To cast a beam in the mind's eye:  
Who will count the gains and the losses  
On the Day of Jubilo?

Public accountant with double entry  
Enter in red war's final cast  
In the black column the pacing sentry,  
Old women picking the hogs' mast  
For the Day of Jubilo

Lean to the crowded air and hear,  
Eavesdropper, how it goes inside  
Your own deaf and roaring ear:  
Boys caress the machines they ride  
On the Day of Jubilo

## JUBILO

After the dry and sticking tongue  
After our incivility  
Who will inflate the poet's lung  
Gone flat of this indignity  
Till the Day of Jubilo?

Scholar, no dog will have your day  
For all your capital's run out,  
Wry baby in wet disarray—  
Scholar, prepare your meagre clout  
For the Day of Jubilo

Under the slip and slide of day  
Think, at the end you'll never be  
Trapped in a fox-hole of decay  
Nor snip nor glide of history  
After the Day of Jubilo

All our jubilant eyes are raised,  
Jubilo. Over the barbican  
On the great Day pure and dazed,  
Empty of heart the empty man  
Of the Day of Jubilo

## JUBILO

Then for the Day of Jubilo  
The patient bares his arm at dawn  
To suck the blood's transfusing glow  
And then when all the blood is gone  
(For the Day of Jubilo)

Salt serum stays his arteries  
Sly tide threading the ribs of sand,  
Till his lost being dries, and cries  
For that unspeakable salt land  
Beyond the Day of Jubilo.

## WINTER MASK

To the memory of W. B. Yeats

### I

Towards nightfall when the wind  
Tries the eaves and casements  
(A winter wind of the mind  
Long gathering its will)  
I lay the mind's contents  
Bare, as upon a table,  
And ask, in a time of war,  
Whether there is still  
To a mind frivolously dull  
Anything worth living for.

## WINTER MASK

### II

If I am meek and dull  
And a poor sacrifice  
Of perverse will to cull  
The act from the attempt,  
Just look into damned eyes  
And give the returning glare;  
For the damned like it, the more  
Damnation is exempt  
From what would save its heir  
With a thing worth living for.

### III

The poisoned rat in the wall  
Cuts through the wall like a knife,  
Then blind, drying, and small  
And driven to cold water,  
Dies of the water of life:  
Both damned in eternal ice,  
The traitor become the boor  
Who had led his friend to slaughter,  
Now bites his head—not nice,  
The food that he lives for.

## WINTER MASK

### IV

I supposed two scenes of hell,  
Two human bestiaries,  
Might uncommonly well  
Convey the doom I thought;  
But lest the horror freeze  
The gentler estimation  
I go to the sylvan door  
Where nature has been bought  
In rational proration  
As a thing worth living for.

### V

Should the buyer have been beware?  
It is an uneven trade  
For man has wet his hair  
Under the winter weather  
With only fog for shade:  
His mouth a bracketed hole  
Picked by the crows that bore  
Nature to their hanged brother,  
Who rattles against the bole  
The thing that he lived for.

VI

I asked the master Yeats  
Whose great style could not tell  
Why it is man hates  
His own salvation,  
Prefers the way to hell,  
And finds his last safety  
In the self-made curse that bore  
Him towards damnation:  
The drowned undrowned by the sea  
The sea worth living for.

## THE EYE

λαιδρὴ κορώνη, κῶς τὸ χεῖλος οὐκ ἀλγείῃς;

—CALLIMACHUS.

To E. E. Cummings

I see the horses and the sad streets  
Of my childhood in an agate eye  
Roving, under the clean sheets,  
Over a black hole in the sky.

The ill man becomes the child,  
The evil man becomes the lover;  
The natural man with evil roiled  
Pulls down the sphereless sky for cover.

I see the gray heroes and the graves  
Of my childhood in the nuclear eye—  
Horizons spent in dun caves  
Sucked down into the sinking sky.

The happy child becomes the man,  
The elegant man becomes the mind,  
The fathered gentleman who can  
Perform quick feats of gentle kind.

## THE EYE

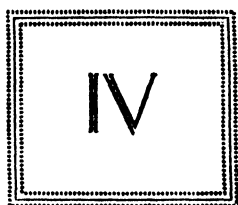
I see the long field and the noon  
Of my childhood in the carbolic eye,  
Dissolving pupil of the moon  
Seared from the raveled hole of the sky.

The nice ladies and gentlemen,  
The teaser and the jelly-bean  
Play cockalorum-and-the-hen,  
When the cool afternoons pour green:

I see the father and the cooling cup  
Of my childhood in the swallowing sky  
Down, down, until down is up  
And there is nothing in the eye,

Shut shutter of the mineral man  
Who takes the fatherless dark to bed,  
The acid sky to the brain-pan;  
And calls the crows to peck his head.







## HORATIAN EPODE TO THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

*Duchess: Who am I?*

*Bosola: Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best but a  
salvatory of green mummy.*

The stage is about to be swept of corpses.  
You have no more chance than an infusorian  
Lodged in a hollow molar of an eohippus.  
Come, now, no prattle of remergence with the  
ὄντως ὄν.

. . . . .  
As (the form requires the myth)  
A Greek girl stood once in the prytaneum  
Of Carneades, hearing mouthings of Probability,  
Then mindful of love dashed her brain on a megalith

So you, O nameless Duchess who die young,  
Meet death somewhat lovingly  
And I am filled with a pity of beholding skulls.  
There was no pride like yours.

HORATIAN EPODE TO THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

Now considerations of the void coming after  
Not changed by the "strict gesture" of your death  
Split the straight line of pessimism  
Into two infinities.

It is moot whether there be divinities  
As I finish this play by Webster:  
The street-cars are still running however  
And the katharsis fades in the warm water of a yawn.

## RETRODUCTION TO AMERICAN HISTORY

Cats walk the floor at midnight; that enemy of fog,  
The moon, wraps the bedpost in receding stillness;  
    sleep  
Collects all weary nothings and lugs away the  
    towers,  
The pinnacles of dust that feed the subway.

What stiff unhappy silence waits on sleep  
Struts like an officer; tongues next-door bewitch  
Themselves with divination; I like a melancholy oaf  
Beg the nightly pillow with impossible loves.  
And abnegation folds hands, crossed like the knees  
Of the complacent tailor, stitches cloaks of mercy  
To the backs of obsessions.

Winter like spring no less  
Tolerates the air; the wild pheasant meets innocently  
The gun; night flouts illumination with meagre  
    impudence.

## RETRODUCTION TO AMERICAN HISTORY

In such serenity of equal fates, why has Narcissus  
Urged the brook with questions? Merged with the  
element

Speculation suffuses the meadow with drops to tickle  
The cow's gullet; grasshoppers drink the rain.  
Antiquity breached mortality with myths.

Narcissus is vocabulary. Hermes decorates  
A cornice on the Third National Bank. Vocabulary  
Becomes confusion, decoration a blight; the Par-  
thenon

In Tennessee stucco, art for the sake of death. Now  
(The bedpost receding in stillness) you brush your  
teeth

"Hitting on all thirty-two;" scholarship pares  
The nails of Catullus, sniffs his sheets, restores  
His "passionate underwear;" morality disciplines  
the other

Person; every son-of-a-bitch is Christ, at least Rous-  
seau;

Prospero serves humanity in steam-heated univer-  
sities, three

Thousand dollars a year. Simplicity, Flamineo, is  
obscene;

Sunlight topples indignant from the hill.

## RETRODUCTION TO AMERICAN HISTORY

In every railroad station everywhere every lover  
Waits for his train. He cannot hear. The smoke  
Thickens. Ticket in hand, he pumps his body  
Toward lower six, for one more terse ineffable trip,  
His very eyeballs fixed in disarticulation. The berth  
Is clean; no elephants, vultures, mice or spiders  
Distract him from nonentity: his metaphors are  
dead.

More sanitation is enough, enough remains: dreams  
Do not end—lucidities beyond the stint of thought.  
For intellect is a mansion where waste is without  
drain;

A corpse is your bedfellow, your great-grandfather  
dines

With you this evening on a cavalry horse. Intellect  
Connives with heredity, creates fate as Euclid geome-  
try

By definition:

The sunlit bones in your house  
Are immortal in the titmouse,  
They trip the feet of grandma  
Like an afterthought each day.  
These unseen sunlit bones,

## RETRODUCTION TO AMERICAN HISTORY

They may be in the cat  
That startles them in grandma  
But look at this or that  
They meet you every way.

For Pelops' and Tantalus' successions were at once  
simpler,

If perplexed, and less subtle than you think.

Heredity

Proposes love, love exacts language, and we lack  
Language. When shall we speak again? When shall  
The sparrow dusting the gutter sing? When shall  
This drift with silence meet the sun? When shall I  
wake?

## CAUSERIE

*. . . party on the stage of the Earl Carroll Theatre on Feb. 23. At this party Joyce Hawley, a chorus-girl, bathed in the nude in a bathtub filled with alleged wine.—New York Times.*

What are the springs of sleep? What is the motion  
Of dust in the lane that has an end in falling?  
Heroes, heroes, you auguries of passion,  
Where are the heroes with sloops and telescopes  
Who got out of bed at four to vex the dawn?  
Men for their last quietus scanned the earth,  
Alert on the utmost foothill of the mountains;  
They were the men who climbed the topmost screen  
Of the world, if sleep but lay beyond it,  
Sworn to the portage of our confirmed sensations,  
Seeking our image in the farthest hills.  
Now bearing a useless testimony of strife  
Gathered in a rumor of light, we know our end  
A packet of worm-seed, a garden of spent tissues.

## CAUSERIE

I've done no rape, arson, incest, no murder,  
Yet cannot sleep. The petty crimes of silence  
(Wary pander to whom the truth's chief whore)  
I have omitted; no fool can say my tongue  
Reversed its fetish and made a cult of conscience.  
This innermost disturbance is a babble,  
It is a sign moved to my face as well  
Where every tide of heart surges to speech  
Until in that loquacity of visage  
One speaks a countenance fitter for death than hell.  
Always your features lean to one direction  
And by that charted distance know your doom.  
For death is "morality touched with emotion,"  
The syllable and full measure of affirmation;  
Give life the innocent crutch of quiet fools.

Where is your house, in which room stands your bed?  
What window discovers these insupportable dreams?  
In a lean house spawned on baked limestone  
Blood history is the murmur of grasshoppers  
Eastward of the dawn. Have you a daughter,  
Daughters are the seed of occupations,  
Of asperities, such as wills, deeds, mortgages,

## CAUSERIE

Duels, estates, statesmen, pioneers, embezzlers,  
"Eminent Virginians," reminiscences, bastards,  
The bar-sinister hushed, effaced by the porcelain tub.  
A daughter is the fruit of occupations;  
Let her not read history lest knowledge  
Of her fathers instruct her to be a petty bawd.  
Vittoria was herself, the contemporary strumpet  
A plain bitch.

For miracles are faint  
And resurrection is our weakest clause of religion,  
I have known men in my youth who foundered on  
This point of doctrine: John Ransom, boasting hardy  
Entelechies yet botched in the head, lacking grace;  
Warren thirsty in Kentucky, his hair in the rain,  
asleep;  
None so unbaptized as Edmund Wilson the  
unwearied,  
That sly parody of the devil. They lacked doctrine;  
They waited. I, who watched out the first crisis  
With them, wait:

## CAUSERIE

For the incredible image. Now  
I am told that Purusha sits no more in our eyes.

Year after year the blood of Christ will sleep  
In the holy tree, the branches sagged without bloom  
Till the plant overflowing the stale vegetation  
In May the creek swells with the anemone,  
The Lord God wastes his substance towards the  
ocean.

In Christ we have lived, on the flood of Christ borne  
up,

Who now is a precipitate flood of silence,  
We a drenched wreck off an imponderable shore:  
A jagged cloud is our memory of shore  
Whereon we figure hills below ultimate ranges.  
You cannot plot the tendency of man,  
Whither it leads is not mysterious  
In the various grave; but whence the impulse  
To lust for the apple of apples on Christ's tree,  
To desire in the eye, to penetrate your sleep,  
Perhaps to catch in unexpected leaves  
The light incentive of your absolute suspicion?

## CAUSERIE

Over the mountains, the last barrier, you'd spill  
These relics of your sires in a pool of sleep,  
The sun being drained.

We have learned to require  
In the infirm concessions of memory  
The privilege never to hear too much.  
What is this conversation, now secular,  
A speech not mine yet speaking for me in  
The heaving jelly of my tribal air?  
It rises in the throat, it climbs the tongue;  
It perches there for secret tutelage  
And gets it, of inscrutable instruction—  
Which is a puzzle like crepuscular light  
That has no visible source but fills the trees  
With equal foliage, as if the upper leaf  
No less than the under were only imminent shade.

Manhood like a lawyer with his formulas  
Sesamés his youth for innocent acquittal.

The essential wreckage of your age is different,  
The accident the same; the Annabella

## CAUSERIE

Of proper incest, no longer incestuous:  
In an age of abstract experience, fornication  
Is self-expression, adjunct to Christian euphoria,  
And whores become delinquents; delinquents,  
patients;  
Patients, wards of society. Whores, by that rule,  
Are precious.

Was it for this that Lucius  
Became the ass of Thessaly? For this did Kyd  
Unlock the lion of passion on the stage?  
To litter a race of politic pimps? To glut  
The Capitol with the progeny of thieves—  
Where now the antique courtesy of your myths  
Goes in to sleep under a still shadow?

## FRAGMENT OF A MEDITATION

Not yet the thirtieth year, the thirtieth  
Station where time reverses his light heels  
To run both ways, and makes of forward back;  
Whose long coördinates are birth and death  
And zero is the origin of breath:  
Not yet the thirtieth year of gratitude,  
Not yet suffering but a year's lack,  
All thanks that mid-mortality is done,  
That the new breath on the invisible track  
Winds anciently into my father's blood.

In the beginning the irresponsible Verb  
Connived with chaos whence I've seen it start  
Riddles in the head for the nervous heart  
To count its beat on: all beginnings run  
Like water the easiest way or like birds  
Fly on their cool imponderable flood.

Then suddenly the noon turns afternoon  
And afternoon like an ill-written page

FRAGMENT OF MEDITATION

Will fade, until the very stain of light  
Gathers in all the venom of the night—  
The equilibrium of the thirtieth age.

The thirtieth, not yet the thirtieth year  
Of wonders, revelations, whispers, signs:  
Impartial dumb truths of sound and sight  
Known beyond speech, immune to common fear.  
Already the wind whistles the revelations  
Of the time, but I'll go back seventy years  
And more to the great Administrations:  
Yèť six had gone and all the public men  
Whom doctrine and an evil nature made  
Were only errand boys beaten by the sun  
While Henry Adams fuddled in the shade.

I've heard what they said, in the running tap  
Drawing water, their watery words, clear  
Like a sad harlot's useless lucid pap  
(I've heard the lion of S Street get his cheer),  
I understood it, the general syllable  
In a private ear, lost. . . .

For who can tell  
 What the goat calls to the heifer, or the hen  
 Even to the cock her love? At thirty years  
 The years of the Christ, one will perceive, know,  
 Report new verity with a certain pen.

In the decade from eighteen-fifty-one  
 Where was Calhoun whose bristled intellect  
 Sumner the refined one did not admire?  
 I am convinced 'twas Calhoun who divined  
 How the great western star's last race would run  
 Unbridled round our personal defect,  
 Grinding its ash with engines of its mind.  
 "Too Southern and too simple," his death's head  
 Uttered a *Dies Irae* that last day  
 When Senator Mason in a voice to stun  
 Read off his speech; then put Calhoun to bed.  
 They put him in his grave. Does the worm say  
 In the close senate of tempestuous clay  
 That his intellect makes too difficult  
 The grave, as his enemies our life?  
 It's quiet there, for the worm's one fault  
 Is not discourtesy (give worms their dues)

## FRAGMENT OF MEDITATION

In case the guest hurried by mortal strife  
Enter the house in muddy overshoes.

It was a time of tributes; let me pay  
Tribute to a man grandfather knew well  
(Or so 'twas said, but one can never tell),  
A stocky man but slight, no symmetry  
Of face and eye, yet a distinction  
Of the poet against the world; he dreamed the soul  
Of the wide world and prodigies to come;  
Exemplar of dignity, a gentleman  
Who raised the black flag of the lower mind;  
Hated in life by all; in death praised;  
I cannot yet begin to understand  
Why we are proud that an ancestor knew  
The crazy Poe, who was not of our kind—  
Bats in the belfry that round and round flew  
In vapors not quite wholesome for the mind.

After Calhoun the local tenements  
Of nature, tempered to the exigencies  
Of air and fire, blurred with the public sense,  
Diffused, while the Black Republicans  
Took a short memory to their hot desire,

## FRAGMENT OF MEDITATION

And honor turned a common entity  
Crying decisions from the evening news.  
Yet in a year, at thirty, one shall see  
The wisdom of history, how she takes  
Each epoch by the neck and, growling, shakes  
It like a rat while she faintly mews.  
Perhaps at the age of thirty one shall see  
In the wide world the prodigies to come:  
The long-gestating Christ, the Agnulus  
Of time, got in the belly of Abstraction  
By Ambition, a bull of pious use.  
O Pasiphaë! mother of god, lest nature,  
Peritonitis or morning sickness stunt  
The growth of god in an unwholesome juice,  
Eat cannon and cornflakes, that the lamb,  
Spaceless as snow, may spare the rational earth  
(Weary of prodigies and the Holy Runt)  
A second prodigious, two-legged birth.

The signs and portents screaming in the air,  
The nativity in my thirtieth year  
Will glow in the heavens, the myriad fireflies  
At the holy hour hovering round the house  
Will stream in the night like flaming hair,

## FRAGMENT OF MEDITATION

And man will scurry with averted eyes  
Crouching, peering, silent, a drunken mouse.  
The orange groves will blossom, the shining Sierras  
Kindle all night far as Los Angeles;  
With a noise, threatening, of wandering bees  
Coming, angry with the air of their carouse,  
The lamb through the sandpaper gates of life  
(Made rougher by the bull's intenser strife)  
Will leap, while the wild-eyed Pasiphaë  
By the inscrutable wrath of glory stung  
Hears the Wise Men\* come swiftly from the sea.  
The bull smoothly rolls his powerful tongue.

\* I originally thought of the Wise Men as Mr. Herbert Hoover, the late Otto H. Kahn (an American banker and philanthropist), and the late Gertrude Stein; but I decided that the occasion required even wiser persons than these, and when I couldn't find them, I gave it up, and brought the poem to an abrupt end.

A. T.

## ELEGY

*Jefferson Davis: 1808-1889*

No more the white refulgent streets,  
Never the dry hollows of the mind  
Shall he in fine courtesy walk  
Again, for death is not unkind.

A civil war cast on his fame,  
The four years' odium of strife  
Unbodies his dust; love cannot warm  
His tall corpuscles to this life.

What did we gain? What did we lose?  
Be still; grief for the pious dead  
Suspires from bosoms of kind souls  
Lavender-wise, propped up in bed.

Our loss put six feet under ground  
Is measured by the magnolia's root;  
Our gain's the intellectual sound  
Of death's feet round a weedy tomb.

## ELEGY

In the back chambers of the State  
(Just preterition for his crimes)  
We curse him to our busy sky  
Who's busy in a hell a hundred times

A day, though profitless his task,  
Heedless what Belial may say—  
He who wore out the perfect mask  
Orestes fled in night and day.

## ECLOGUE OF THE LIBERAL AND THE POET

LIBERAL

In that place, shepherd, all the men are dead.

POET

Yes, look at the water grim and black  
Where immense Europa rears her head,  
Her face pinched and her breasts slack.

LIBERAL

I said, shepherd, all the men are dead.

POET

Shall I turn to the road that goes America?  
Is that a place for men to be dead  
Or living? If you don't mind being asked.

LIBERAL

Try it and see. It's a pretty good way  
To skim three thousand miles in a day  
And none of them America.

ECLOGUE OF THE LIBERAL AND THE POET

POET

But what about her face and the tasked  
Wonders of her air and soil, her big belly  
That Putnam writes about under the sun?

LIBERAL

I don't know Put, I don't know his Nelly—  
I'd name her that if she'd name it fun  
But you know she hasn't any name,  
Nowhere you touch her she's the same.

POET

What, shepherd, are we talking about?

LIBERAL

You started it, shepherd.

POET

Shepherd, I didn't.

LIBERAL

You did; you saw the poetical face of Europe.

POET

You said it was no place for men to be.

ECLOGUE OF THE LIBERAL AND THE POET

LIBERAL

I meant seawater; you thought I meant hope.

POET

Hell, I reckon you think I am a dope.

LIBERAL

I didn't say that; I said there was no place.

POET

If not in a place, where are the People weeping?

LIBERAL

They creep weeping in the face, not place.

POET

Is it something with which we may cope—  
The weeping, the creeping, the peepee-ing, the  
peeping?

LIBERAL

Hanging is something which I will do with this  
rope.

POET

Alas, for us who peep, weeping.  
Alas, for us you see but little hope.

## ECLOGUE OF THE LIBERAL AND THE POET

LIBERAL

Alas, I didn't say that; you rhymed hope with rope.  
I meant I was going to hang us both for creeping.

POET

Afterwards they could process us into soap;  
Afterwards they would rhyme soap with hope.

BOTH

What a cheerful rhyme! Clean not mean!  
Been not seen! Not tired—expired!  
We must now decide about place.  
We decide that place is the big weeping face  
And the other abstract lace of the race.

LIBERAL

Shepherd, what are we talking about?

POET

Oh, why, shepherd, are we stalking about?

# ODE TO OUR YOUNG PRO-CONSULS OF THE AIR

To St.—John Perse

Once more the country calls  
From sleep, as from his doom,  
    Each citizen to take  
    His modest stake  
Where the sky falls  
With a Pacific boom.

Warm winds in even climes  
Push southward angry bees  
    As we, with tank and plane,  
    Wrest land and main  
From yellow mimes,  
The puny Japanese.

Boys hide in lunging cubes  
Crouching to explode,  
    Beyond Atlantic skies,  
    With cheerful cries  
Their barking tubes  
Upon the German toad.

OUR YOUNG PRO-CONSULS OF THE AIR

Marvelling day by day  
Upon the human kind  
    What might I have done  
    (A poet alone)  
To balk or slay  
These enemies of mind?

I sought by night to foal  
Chimeras into men—  
    Decadence of power  
    That, at late hour,  
Untimed the soul  
To live the past again:

Toy sword, three-cornered hat  
At York and Lexington—  
    While *Bon-Homme* whipped at sea  
    This enemy  
Whose roar went flat  
After George made him run;

OUR YOUNG PRO-CONSULS OF THE AIR

Toy rifle, leather hat  
Above the boyish beard—  
    And in that Blue renown  
    The Gray went down,  
Down like a rat,  
And even the rats cheered.

In a much later age  
(Europe had been in flames)  
    Proud Wilson yielded ground  
    To franc and pound,  
Made pilgrimage  
In the wake of Henry James.

Where Lou Quatorze held *fête*  
For sixty thousand men,  
    France took the German sword  
    But later, bored,  
Opened the gate  
To Hitler—at Compiègne.

OUR YOUNG PRO-CONSULS OF THE AIR

In this bad time no part  
The poet took, nor chance:  
    He studied Swift and Donne,  
    Ignored the Hun,  
While with faint heart  
Proust caused the fall of France.

Sad day at Oahu  
When the Jap beetle hit!  
    Our Proustian retort  
    Was Kimmel and Short,  
Old women in blue,  
And then the beetle bit.

It was defeat, or near it!  
Yet all that feeble time  
    Brave Brooks and lithe MacLeish  
    Had sworn to thresh  
Our flagging spirit  
With literature made Prime!

OUR YOUNG PRO-CONSULS OF THE AIR

Cow Creek and bright Bear Wallow,  
Nursing the blague that dulls  
Spirits grown Eliotic,  
Now patriotic  
Are: we follow  
*The Irresponsibles!*

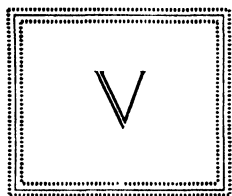
Young men, Americans!  
You go to win the world  
With zeal pro-consular  
For our whole star—  
You partisans  
Of liberty unfurled!

O animal excellence,  
Take pterodactyl flight  
Fire-winged into the air  
And find your lair  
With cunning sense  
On some Arabian bight

Or sleep your dreamless sleep  
(Reptilian bomber!) by  
    The Mediterranean  
    And like a man  
Swear you to keep  
Faith with imperial eye:

Take off, O gentle youth,  
And coasting India  
    Scale crusty Everest  
    Whose mythic crest  
Resists your truth;  
And spying far away

Upon the Tibetan plain  
A limping caravan,  
    Dive, and exterminate  
    The Lama, late  
Survival of old pain.  
Go kill the dying swan.





## ODE TO FEAR

### *Variation on a Theme by Collins*

Let the day glare: O memory, your tread  
Beats to the pulse of suffocating night—  
Night peering from his dark but fire-lit head  
Burns on the day his tense and secret light.

Now they dare not to gloss your savage dream,  
O beast of the heart, those saints who cursed your  
name;

You are the current of the frozen stream,  
Shadow invisible, ambushed and vigilant flame.

My eldest companion present in solitude,  
Watch-dog of Thebes when the blind hero strove:  
You, omniscient, at the cross-roads stood  
When Laius, the slain dotard, drenched the grove.

Now to the eye of prophecy immune,  
Fading and harried, you stalk us in the street  
From the recesses of the August noon,  
Alert world over, crouched on the air's feet.

## ODE TO FEAR

You are our surety to immortal life,  
God's hatred of the universal stain—  
The heritage, O Fear, of ancient strife  
Compounded with the tissue of the vein.

And I when all is said have seen your form  
Most agile and most treacherous to the world  
When, on a child's long day, a dry storm  
Burst on the cedars, lit by the sun and hurled!

## THE TRAVELLER

To Archibald MacLeish

The afternoon with heavy hours  
Lies vacant on the wanderer's sight  
And sunset waits whose cloudy towers  
Expect the legions of the night

Till sullen thunder from the cave  
Of twilight with deliberate swell  
Whispers the air his darkening slave  
To loose the nether bolts of hell

To crush the battlements of cloud  
The wall of light around the West  
So that the swarming dark will crowd  
The traveller upon his quest

And all the air with heavy hours  
Sinks on the wanderer's dull sight  
And the thick dark whose hidden towers  
Menace his travel to the night

## THE TRAVELLER

Rolls forward, backward hill to hill  
Until the seeker knows not where  
Beyond the shade of Peachers' Mill  
In the burnt meadow, with colourless hair

The secret ones around a stone  
Their lips withdrawn in meet surprise  
Lie still, being naught but bone  
With naught but space within their eyes

Until bewildered by the road  
And half-forgetful of his quest  
The wanderer with such a load  
Of breathing, being too late a guest

Turns back, so near the secret stone,  
Falls down breathless at last and blind,  
And a dark shift within the bone  
Brings him the end he could not find.

## THE OATH

It was near evening, the room was cold  
Half dark; Uncle Ben's brass bullet-mould  
And powder-horn and Major Bogan's face  
Above the fire in the half-light plainly said:  
There's naught to kill but the animated dead.  
Horn nor mould nor major follows the chase.  
Being cold I urged Lytle to the fire  
In the blank twilight with not much left untold  
By two old friends when neither's a great liar.  
We sat down evenly in the smoky chill.  
There's precious little to say between day and dark,  
Perhaps a few words on the implacable will  
Of time sailing like a magic barque  
Or something as fine for the amenities,  
Till dusk seals the window, the fire grows bright,  
And the wind saws the hill with a swarm of bees.  
Now meditating a little on the firelight  
We heard the darkness grapple with the night  
And give an old man's valedictory wheeze  
From his westward breast between his polar jaws;

## THE OATH

Then Lytle asked: Who are the dead?  
Who are the living and the dead?  
And nothing more was said.  
So I, leaving Lytle to that dream,  
Decided what it is in time that gnaws  
The ageing fury of a mountain stream  
When suddenly as an ignorant mind will do  
I thought I heard the dark pounding its head  
On a rock, crying: *Who are the dead?*  
Then Lytle turned with an oath—By God it's true!

## DITTY

The moon will run all consciences to cover,  
Night is now the easy peer of day;  
Little boys no longer sight the plover  
Streaked in the sky, and cattle go  
Warily out in search of misty hay.  
Look at the blackbird, the pretty eager swallow,  
The buzzard, and all the birds that sail  
With the smooth essential flow  
Of time through men, who fail.

For now the moon with friendless light carouses  
On hill and housetop, street and marketplace,  
Men will plunge, mile after mile of men,  
To crush this lucent madness of the face,  
Go home and put their heads upon the pillow,  
Turn with whatever shift the darkness cleaves,  
Tuck in their eyes, and cover  
The flying dark with sleep like falling leaves.

## THE WOLVES

There are wolves in the next room waiting  
With heads bent low, thrust out, breathing  
At nothing in the dark; between them and me  
A white door patched with light from the hall  
Where it seems never (so still is the house)  
A man has walked from the front door to the stair.  
It has all been forever. Beasts claw the floor.  
I have brooded on angels and archfiends  
But no man has ever sat where the next room's  
Crowded with wolves, and for the honor of man  
I affirm that never have I before. Now while  
I have looked for the evening star at a cold window  
And whistled when Arcturus spilt his light,  
I've heard the wolves scuffle, and said: So this  
Is man; so—what better conclusion is there—  
The day will not follow night, and the heart  
Of man has a little dignity, but less patience  
Than a wolf's, and a duller sense that cannot  
Smell its own mortality. (This and other  
Meditations will be suited to other times

## THE WOLVES

After dog silence howls his epitaph.)  
Now remember courage, go to the door,  
Open it and see whether coiled on the bed  
Or cringing by the wall, a savage beast  
Maybe with golden hair, with deep eyes  
Like a bearded spider on a sunlit floor  
Will snarl—and man can never be alone.

## THE SUBWAY

Dark accurate plunger down the successive knell  
Of arch on arch, where ogives burst a red  
Reverberance of hail upon the dead  
Thunder like an exploding crucible!  
Harshly articulate, musical steel shell  
Of angry worship, hurled religiously  
Upon your business of humility  
Into the iron forestries of hell:

Till broken in the shift of quieter  
Dense altitudes tangential of your steel,  
I am become geometries, and glut  
Expansions like a blind astronomer  
Dazed, while the worldless heavens bulge and reel  
In the cold revery of an idiot.

## THE EAGLE

Say never the strong heart  
In the consuming breath  
Cries out unto the dark  
The skinny death.

Look! whirring on the rind  
Of æther a white eagle,  
Shot out of the mind,  
The windy apple, burning,

Hears no more, past compass  
In his topless flight,  
The apple wormed, blown up  
By shells of light;

So, faggot of the heart  
On the cinder day—  
The woman and the man!  
David and Sybil say

## THE EAGLE

The world has a season  
Under the world's might:  
Now in deep autumn—  
Black apple in the night.

Think not the world spins ever  
(Only the world has a year)  
Only the gaunt fierce bird  
Flies, merciless with fear

Lest air hold him not,  
Beats up the scaffold of space  
Sick of the world's rot—  
God's hideous face.

## LAST DAYS OF ALICE

Alice grown lazy, mammoth but not fat,  
Declines upon her lost and twilight age;  
Above in the dozing leaves the grinning cat  
Quivers forever with his abstract rage:

Whatever light swayed on the perilous gate  
Forever sways, nor will the arching grass,  
Caught when the world clattered, undulate  
In the deep suspension of the looking-glass.

Bright Alice! always pondering to gloze  
The spoiled cruelty she had meant to say  
Gazes learnedly down her airy nose  
At nothing, nothing thinking all the day.

Turned absent-minded by infinity  
She cannot move unless her double move,  
The All-Alice of the world's entity  
Smashed in the anger of her hopeless love,

LAST DAYS OF ALICE

Love for herself who, as an earthly twain,  
Pouted to join her two in a sweet one;  
No more the second lips to kiss in vain  
The first she broke, plunged through the glass alone—

Alone to the weight of impassivity,  
Incest of spirit, theorem of desire,  
Without will as chalky cliffs by the sea,  
Empty as the bodiless flesh of fire:

All space, that heaven is a dayless night,  
A nightless day driven by perfect lust  
For vacancy, in which her bored eyesight  
Stares at the drowsy cubes of human dust.

—We too back to the world shall never pass  
Through the shattered door, a dumb shade-harried  
crowd

Being all infinite, function depth and mass  
Without figure, a mathematical shroud

Hurled at the air—blesséd without sin!  
O God of our flesh, return us to Your wrath,  
Let us be evil could we enter in  
Your grace, and falter on the stony path!

## THE TWELVE

There by some wrinkled stones round a leafless tree  
With beards askew, their eyes dull and wild  
Twelve ragged men, the council of charity  
Wandering the face of the earth a fatherless child,  
Kneel, at their infidelity aghast,  
For where was it, somewhere in Syria  
Or Palestine when the streams went red,  
The victor of Rome, his arms outspread,  
His eyes cold with his inhuman ecstasy,  
Cried the last word, the accursed last  
Of the forsaken that seared the western heart  
With the fire of the wind, the thick and the fast  
Whirl of the damned in the heavenly storm:  
Now the wind's empty and the twelve living dead  
Look round them for that promontory Form  
Whose mercy flashed from the sheet lightning's head;  
But the twelve lie in the sand by the dry rock  
Seeing nothing—the sand, the tree, rocks  
Without number—and turn away the face  
To the mind's briefer and more desert place.

## THE TROUT MAP

The Management Area of Cherokee  
National Forest, interested in fish,  
Has mapped Tellico and Bald Rivers  
And North River, with the tributaries  
Brookshire Branch and Sugar Cove Creek:  
A fishy map for facile fishery

In Marvel's kind Ocean: drawn in two  
Colors, blue and red—blue for the hue  
Of Europe (Tennessee water is green),  
Red lines by blue streams to warn  
The fancy-fishmen from protected fish;  
Black borders hold the Area in a cracked dish,

While other blacks, the dots and dashes, wire  
The fisher's will through classic laurel  
Over boar tracks to creamy pot-holes lying  
Under Bald falls that thump the shying  
Trout: we flew Professor, the Hackles and Worms.  
(Tom Bagley and I were dotted and dashed wills.)

Up Green Cove gap from Preacher Millsap's cabin  
We walked a confident hour of victory,

## THE TROUT MAP

Sloped to the west on a trail that led us  
To Bald River where map and scene were one  
In seen-identity. Eight trout is the story  
In three miles. We came to a rock-bridge

On which the road went left around a hill,  
The river, right, tumbled into a cove;  
But the map dashed the road along the stream  
And we dotted man's fishiest enthymeme  
With jellied feet upon understanding love  
Of what eyes see not, that nourishes the will:

We were fishers, weren't we? And tried to fish  
The egoed belly's dry cartograph—  
Which made the government fish lie down and laugh.  
(Tommy and I listened, we heard them shake  
Mountain and cove because the map was fake.)  
After eighteen miles our feet were clownish,

Then darkness took us into wheezing straits  
Where coarse Magellan idling with his fates  
Ran with the gulls for map around the Horn,  
Or wheresoever the mind with tidy scorn  
Revisits the world upon a dry sunbeam.  
Now mapless the mountains were a dream.

## THE MEANING OF LIFE

### *A Monologue*

Think about it at will: there is that  
Which is the commentary; there's that other,  
Which may be called the immaculate  
Conception of its essence in itself.  
It is necessary to distinguish the weights  
Of the two methods lest the first smother  
The second, the second be speechless (without the  
first).

I was saying this more briefly the other day  
But one must be explicit as well as brief.  
When I was a small boy I lived at home  
For nine years in that part of old Kentucky  
Where the mountains fringe the Blue Grass,  
The old men shot at one another for luck;  
It made me think I was like none of them.  
At twelve I was determined to shoot only  
For honor; at twenty not to shoot at all;

## THE MEANING OF LIFE

I know at thirty-three that one must shoot  
As often as one gets the rare chance—  
In killing there is more than commentary.  
One's sense of the proper decoration alters  
But there's a kind of lust feeds on itself  
Unspoken to, unspeaking; subterranean  
As a black river full of eyeless fish  
Heavy with spawn; with a passion for time  
Longer than the arteries of a cave.

## THE MEANING OF DEATH

### *An After-Dinner Speech*

I rise, gentlemen, it is the pleasant hour.  
Darkness falls. The night falls.

Time, fall no more.  
Let that be life—time falls no more. The threat  
Of time we in our own courage have forsworn.  
Let light fall, there shall be eternal light  
And all the light shall on our heads be worn

Although at evening clouds infest the sky  
Broken at base from which the lemon sun  
Pours acid of winter on a useful view—  
Four water-towers, two churches, and a river:  
These are the sights I give in to at night  
When the long covers loose the roving eye

## THE MEANING OF DEATH

To find the horror of the day a shape  
Of life: we would have more than living sight.  
Past delusions are seen as if it all  
Were yesterday flooded with lemon light,  
Vice and virtue, hard sacrifice and crime  
In the cold vanity of time.

Tomorrow

The landscape will respond to jocund day,  
Bright roofs will scintillate with hues of May  
And Phoebus' car, his daily circuit run,  
Brings me to the year when, my time begun,  
I loitered in the backyard by the alley;  
When I was a small boy living at home  
The dark came on in summer at eight o'clock  
For Little Lord Fauntleroy in a perfect frock  
By the alley: mother took him by the ear  
To teach of the mixed modes an ancient fear.  
Forgive me if I am personal.

Gentlemen, let's

Forget the past, its related errors, coarseness  
Of parents, laxities, unrealities of principle.

## THE MEANING OF DEATH

Think of tomorrow. Make a firm postulate  
Of simplicity in desire and act  
Founded on the best hypotheses;  
Desire to eat secretly, alone, lest  
Ritual corrupt our charity,  
Lest darkness fall and time fall  
In a long night when learned arteries  
Mounting the ice and sum of barbarous time  
Shall yield, without essence, perfect accident.

We are the eyelids of defeated caves.

## THE CROSS

There is a place that some men know,  
I cannot see the whole of it  
Nor how I came there. Long ago  
Flame burst out of a secret pit  
Crushing the world with such a light  
The day-sky fell to moonless black,  
The kingly sun to hateful night  
For those, once seeing, turning back:  
For love so hates mortality  
Which is the providence of life  
She will not let it blessed be  
But curses it with mortal strife,  
Until beside the blinding rood  
Within that world-destroying pit  
—Like young wolves that have tasted blood,  
Of death, men taste no more of it.  
So blind, in so severe a place  
(All life before in the black grave)

## THE CROSS

The last alternatives they face  
Of life, without the life to save,  
Being from all salvation weaned—  
A stag charged both at heel and head:  
Who would come back is turned a fiend  
Instructed by the fiery dead.

VI



## INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

### I

Now twenty-four or maybe twenty-five  
Was the woman's age, and her white brow was sleek;  
Lips parted in surprise, the flawless cheek;  
The long brown hair coiled sullenly alive;  
Her hands, dropt in her lap, could not arrive  
At the novel on the table, being weak;  
Nor breath, expunger of the mortal streak  
Of nature, its own tenement contrive;

For look you how her body stiffly lies  
Just as she left it, unprepared to stay,  
The posture waiting on the sleeping eyes,  
While the body's life, deep as a covered well,  
Instinctive as the wind, busy as May,  
Burns out a secret passageway to hell.

II

There is not anything to say to those  
Speechless, who have stood up white to the eye  
All night—till day, harrying the game too close,  
Quarries the perils that at midnight lie  
Waiting for those who hope to mortify  
With foolish daylight their most anxious fear,  
A bloodless and white fear that she may die  
In the hushed room, and leave them soundless here:

There is no word that death can find to say  
Deeper than life, savager than their time.  
When Gabriel's trumpet ends all life's delay,  
Will crash the beams of firmamental woe:  
Not nature will sustain the even crime  
Of death, though death sustains all nature, so.

## DEATH OF LITTLE BOYS

When little boys grown patient at last, weary,  
Surrender their eyes immeasurably to the night,  
The event will rage terrific as the sea;  
Their bodies fill a crumbling room with light.

Then you will touch at the bedside, torn in two,  
Gold curls now deftly intricate with gray  
As the windowpane extends a fear to you  
From one peeled aster drenched with the wind all  
day.

And over his chest the covers in the ultimate dream  
Will mount to the teeth, ascend the eyes, press back  
The locks—while round his sturdy belly gleam  
Suspended breaths, white spars above the wreck:

Till all the guests, come in to look, turn down  
Their palms, and delirium assails the cliff  
Of Norway where you ponder, and your little town  
Reels like a sailor drunk in a rotten skiff.

The bleak sunshine shrieks its chipped music then  
Out to the milkweed amid the fields of wheat.  
There is a calm for you where men and women  
Unroll the chill precision of moving feet.

## THE ANABASIS

In Mem. L. N. L. Ob. MCMXXXII

Noble beyond degree  
In a democracy:  
Slight woman whose spent grace  
Banishes their vision  
To the thin trackless air,  
Stop now upon the stair  
As they have seen you do  
Meridional and true,  
And with nut-brown hair  
Restore location  
To them now blinded quite  
By the grave's after-light,  
For unless it be done  
The slave heart all alone  
Strives timelessly  
To go where you are gone—  
Whether to vaults of air,

## THE ANABASIS

Imponderable nowhere,  
Or the reducing sea—  
The regions that are fair  
Beyond heart's mastery.  
They try your form to see  
(Its lineless agony)  
In our philosophy  
Which stops, as cold and bare  
As headless hair,  
As lifeless as your bones,  
Obtuse as meadow stones:  
Re-corporated be!  
(They cry you in despair)  
Lest we, a blind race,  
Imitate mortality  
For all our living's pace,  
And drawn into the bliss  
Of your dispersèd face  
Should join, before our place,  
Death's long anabasis.

## SHADOW AND SHADE

The shadow streamed into the wall—  
The wall, break-shadow in the blast;  
We lingered wordless while a tall  
Shade enclouded the shadow's cast.

The torrent of the reaching shade  
Broke shadow into all its parts,  
What then had been of shadow made  
Found exigence in fits and starts

Where nothing properly had name  
Save that still element the air,  
Burnt sea of universal frame  
In which impounded now we were:

I took her hand, I shut her eyes  
And all her shadow cleft with shade,  
Shadow was crushed beyond disguise  
But, being fear, was unafraid.

SHADOW AND SHADE

I asked fair shadow at my side:  
What more shall fiery shade require?  
We lay long in the immense tide  
Of shade and shadowy desire

And saw the dusk assail the wall,  
The black surge, mounting, crash the stone!  
Companion of this lust, we fall,  
I said, lest we should die alone.

## PASTORAL

The enquiring fields, courtesies  
And tribulations of the air—  
Be still and give them peace:

The girl in the gold hair  
With her young man in clover  
In shadow of the day's glare

And there they were by the river  
Where a leaf's light interval  
Ringed the deep hurrying mirror;

Yet naught there to befall  
Such meditations as beguile  
Courage when love grows tall

For tall he was in green style  
Of a willow shaking the pool.  
"Let time be quiet as a mile,"

PASTORAL

He said, "time is love's fool."  
Yet time he would appease:  
"Time, be easy and cool."

The enquiring courtesies  
Of first dusk then debated  
To cloud their agonies:

She, her head back, waited  
Barbarous the stalking tide;  
He, nor balked nor sated

But plunged into the wide  
Area of mental ire,  
Lay at her wandering side.

## MR. POPE

When Alexander Pope strolled in the city  
Strict was the glint of pearl and gold sedans.  
Ladies leaned out more out of fear than pity  
For Pope's tight back was rather a goat's than man's.

Often one thinks the urn should have more bones  
Than skeletons provide for speedy dust,  
The urn gets hollow, cobwebs brittle as stones  
Weave to the funeral shell a frivolous rust.

And he who dribbled couplets like a snake  
Coiled to a lithe precision in the sun  
Is missing. The jar is empty; you may break  
It only to find that Mr. Pope is gone.

What requisitions of a verity  
Prompted the wit and rage between his teeth  
One cannot say. Around a crooked tree  
A moral climbs whose name should be a wreath.

## TO A ROMANTIC

(1924)

To Robert Penn Warren

You hold your eager head  
Too high in the air, you walk  
As if the sleepy dead  
Had never fallen to drowse  
From the sublimest talk  
Of many a vehement house.  
Your head so turned turns eyes  
Into the vagrant West;  
Fixing an iron mood  
In an Ozymandias' breast  
And because your clamorous blood  
Beats an impermanent rest  
You think the dead arise  
Westward and fabulous:  
The dead are those whose lies  
Were doors to a narrow house.

## UNNATURAL LOVE

Landor, not that I doubt your word,  
That you had strove with none  
At seventy-five and had deferred  
To nature and art alone;  
It is rather that at thirty-two  
From us I see them part  
After they served, so sweetly, you—  
Yet nature has no heart:  
Brother and sister are estranged  
By his ambitious lies  
For he his sister Helen much deranged—  
Outraged her, and put coppers on her eyes.

## THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM

(Talk between Bird and Girl)

Turn back. Turn, young lady dear  
A murderer's house you enter here

*I was wooed and won little bird*

(I have watched them come bright girls  
Out of the rising sun, with curls)  
The stair is tall the cellar deep  
The wind coughs in the halls

*I never wish to sleep*

From the ceiling the sky falls  
It will press you and press you, dear.

*It is my desire to fear*

(What a child! she desires her fear)  
The house is whirling night, the guests  
Grains of dust from the northwest

THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM

*I do not come for rest*

There is no rest for the dead

*Ready for the couch of my groom*

In a long room beneath the dew  
Where the walls embrace and cling.

*I wear my wedding ring*

He will cut off your finger  
And the blood will linger

*Little bird!*

## THE PROGRESS OF CENIA

*His olim, ut fama est, vitiis ad proelia ventum est,  
his Troiana vides funera principiis.*—PROPERTIUS.

### I. MADRIGALE

Seed in your heart, warm dust transmuted  
Gold, blooms in flakes of radiance  
Arched in your face whereon my days,  
Brinks of silence, glance.

Dream-emptied by some shifting  
Monna Bice, you I resume:  
Continually suffer the habitual  
Cobra of my slightest gloom!

Release the happy hounds that trace  
New smiles from the scampering wood  
Of winter laughters—new prints of light  
And trace them to your face!

## THE PROGRESS OF CENIA

### II. IN WINTERTIME

I would not give the winter for a rose.  
For remembering gold meadows and the hummer  
Sucking them, I think June a time of pillage.  
Your mouth is more passionate than any summer.

They say the spring holds many grapes  
And green promises of fruit in the summer.  
Give me your lips, Cenia, and let winter seas  
Lash the cliffs and snows bite the grape.  
We shall have passion without the sound of bees.

### III. VIGIL

When you are dead and the frosty iron of laughter  
Stupendously settles its pride upon your lips,  
I will gather up the whispers you came after  
When we first met, of immutable dissimulation.

If you are dead when the wind cries again  
Over the bleak gables of an expected hour,  
I will build a chapel out of the astonished pain  
And wait for bells ringing in an empty tower.

IV. DIVAGATION

How many winds forget the seal  
Your dubious intention I forget  
And look into the eager waste  
Of your eyes careless of yesterday.

What cruel wine, what wayward gust  
Tattering sun-hair to shreds of rain,  
Swept you an exile to Cyrene  
Blown by the swollen winds of pain,

I do not know, for we are dead:  
Cluttering our youthful peace  
With a various insolence, you laugh  
The year, avid of love, to grief!

Our death, that was lonely, you've forgot;  
Dawn came to us impatiently  
Then went away with an equal fire,  
Yet in an instant, in lifted night,

This desolation is alive  
With backward motions of bright feet—  
Remembering the madness of scaling  
A certain dusk to the first small star.

## THE PROGRESS OF CENIA

### V. EPILOGUE TO CENIA

Whatever I have said to praise  
Your wrath for me in better days  
Than these, when the toughening grass  
Fell tenderer for you to pass,  
I say again, but differently—  
As a still wind in a winter tree.  
Pardon me! if turning over  
In the reminiscence of a lover  
The leaves of a desiccate romance,  
I can but wonder if a chance  
Invasion of a handsomer look  
Than mine began you another book?  
I shan't devise the same end  
For other books—unless you send  
Me word demanding back your hair.

Do you remember how your hair  
Contained both ears? It never hid  
Them quite, but climbed to a pyramid  
More dazzling than superstitious kings  
Set in the sand as their playthings;

And tell me, was it wantonness  
Fluttering a diaphanous dress  
That night at the Club when polite backs  
Jazzed to the midnight cordax  
And my veins raced to Seboim:  
Not wantonness, but you were slim,  
My dear, with a gift that I admired  
For always being somehow tired!

Whatever else I say, your breast  
Contained the witchery of the rest  
Of a body vanished into a thought  
If touched too late, or lately caught.  
So more than your hair or olive eye  
I remember your breast—does it still lie  
Tactical billows in an upper world  
Of superior sculpture, whence you hurled  
Volcanic innocence and death  
Out of the caverns beneath breath?  
Cenia! forgive these sentiments  
Of a respectful lover shattered in sense—  
Yet sad that the modern bawd, grown dim,  
Obscures the hotel cherubim  
Whose red neckties had honored this page

THE PROGRESS OF CENIA

In a hotter, less barbaric age;  
For now the languid stertorous  
Pale verses of Propertius  
And the sapphire corpse undressed by Donne  
(Prefiguring Rimbaud's etymon)  
Have shrunk to an apotheosis  
Of cold daylight after the kiss.

And since helmets of steel bone rind  
The great heads of the Numerous Mind  
No glories of your breast and thighs  
Shall these poor verses advertise—  
Only the dry debility  
Of a spent wind in a winter tree.

1922-1923

## SONNET TO BEAUTY

The wonder of light is your familiar tale,  
Pert wench, down to the nineteenth century:  
Mr. Rimbaud the Frenchman's apostasy  
Asserts the argument that you are stale,  
Flat and unprofitable, importunate but pale,  
Lithe Corpse! His defect of philosophy  
Impugned, but could not strip your entity  
Of light. Broken, our twilit visions fail.

Beauty, the doctrine of the incorporate Word  
Conceives your fame; how else should you subsist?  
The present age, beak southward, flies like a bird—  
For often at Church I've seen the stained high glass  
Pour out the Virgin and Saints, twist and untwist  
The mortal youth of Christ astride an ass.

## LIGHT

Last night I fled until I came  
To streets where leaking casements dripped  
Stale lamplight from the corpse of flame;  
A nervous window bled.

The moon swagged in the air.  
Out of the mist a girl tossed  
Spittle of song; a hoarse light  
Spattered the fog with heavy hair.

Damp bells in a remote tower  
Sharply released the throat of God,  
I leaned to the erect night  
Dead as stiff turf in winter sod.

Then with the careless energy  
Of a dream, the forward curse  
Of a cold particular eye  
In the headlong hearse.

## HOMILY

*If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out*

If your tired unspeaking head  
Rivet the dark with linear sight,  
Crazed by a warlock with his curse  
Dreamed up in some loquacious bed,  
And if the stage-dark head rehearse  
The fifth act of the closing night,

Why, cut it off, piece after piece,  
And throw the tough cortex away,  
And when you've marvelled on the wars  
That wove their interior smoke its way,  
Tear out the close vermiculate crease  
Where death crawled angrily at bay.

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## ART

When you are come by ways emptied of light  
You'll say goodby, in that indifferent gloom,  
To the quick draughts of old, yet with polite  
Anguish of pride recall as an heirloom  
A dawn when stars dropped gold about your head  
And, so amazed, you knew not were you dead.

~

For, brother, know that this is art, and you  
With a cold incautious sorrow stricken dumb,  
Have your own vanishing slit of light let through,  
Passionate as winter, where only a few may come:  
Not idiots in the street find out the lees  
In the last drink of dying Socrates.

## IGNIS FATUUS

In the twilight of my audacity  
I saw you flee the world, the burnt highways  
Of summer gave up their light: I  
Followed you with the uncommon span  
Of fear-supported and disbursèd eyes.

Towards the dark that harries the tracks  
Of dawn I pursued you only. I fell  
Companionless. The seething stacks  
Of cornstalks, the rat-pillaged meadow  
Censured the lunar interior of the night.

High in what hills, by what illuminations  
Are you intelligible? Your fierce latinity  
Beyond the nubian bulwark of the sea  
Sustains the immaculate sight.

To the green tissue of the subterranean  
Worm I have come back, two-handed from  
The chase, and empty. I have pondered it  
Carefully, and asked: Where is the light  
When the pigeon moults his ease  
Or exile utters the creed of memory?







## IDIOT

The idiot greens the meadow with his eyes,  
The meadow creeps implacable and still;  
A dog barks, the hammock swings, he lies.  
One two three the cows bulge on the hill.

Motion that is not time erects snowdrifts  
While sister's hand sieves waterfalls of lace.  
With a palm fan closer than death he lifts  
The Ozarks and tilted seas across his face.

In the long sunset where impatient sound  
Strips niggers to a multiple of backs  
Flies yield their heat, magnolias drench the ground  
With Appomattox! The shadows lie in stacks.

The julep glass weaves echoes in Jim's kinks  
While ashy Jim puts murmurs in the day;  
Now in the idiot's heart a chamber stinks  
Of dead asters, as the potter's field of May.

All evening the marsh is a slick pool  
 Where dream wild hares, witch hazel, pretty girls.  
 "Up from the important picnic of a fool  
 Those rotted asters!" Eddy on eddy swirls

The innocent mansion of a panther's heart!  
 It crumbles, tick-tick time drags it in  
 Till now his arteries lag and now they start  
 Reverence with the frigid gusts of sin.

The stillness pelts the eye, assaults the hair;  
 A beech sticks out a branch to warn the stars,  
 A lightening-bug jerks angles in the air,  
 Diving. "I am the captain of new wars!"

The dusk runs down the lane driven like hail;  
 Far off a precise whistle is escheat  
 To the dark; and then the towering weak and pale  
 Covers his eyes with memory like a sheet.

## A PAUPER

*. . . and the children's teeth shall be set on edge.*

I see him old, trapped in a burly house  
Cold in the angry spitting of a rain  
Come down these sixty years.

Why vehemently  
Astride the threshold do I wait, marking  
The ice softly pendent on his broken temple?  
Upon the silence I cast the mesh of rancor  
By which the gentler convergences of the flesh  
Scatter untokened, mercilessly estopped.

Why so illegal these tears?

The years' incertitude and  
The dirty white fates trickling  
Blackly down the necessary years  
Define no attitude to the present winter,  
No mood to the cold matter.

## A PAUPER

(I remember my mother, my mother,  
A stiff wind halted outside,  
In the hard ear my country  
Was a far shore crying  
With invisible seas)

When tomorrow pleads the mortal decision  
Sifting rankly out of time's sieve today,  
No words differently will be uttered  
Nor stuttered, like sheep astray.

A pauper in the swift denominating  
Of a bald cliff with a proper name, having words  
As strumpets only, I cannot beat off  
Invincible modes of the sea, hearing:

Be a man my son by God.

He turned again  
To the purring jet yellowing the murder story,  
Deaf to the pathos circling in the air.

## OBITUARY

In memory of S. B. V., 1834-1909

. . . so what the lame four-poster gathered here  
Between the lips of stale and seasoned sheets  
Startles a memory sunlit upon the wall  
(Motors and urchins contest the city streets)

While towards the bed the rigid shadows lean  
Stung to the patience of all emptiness  
And the bed empty where she kept,  
Jerky gnats lunge at the haggard screen.

And now upstairs the lint that crusts the sills  
Erodes in a windy shift along the floor.  
Shall now her touselled eyes rinse out the haze  
Of winter sprawled like a waif outside the door?

## OBITUARY

Feet answer: alternate and withdrawn  
To the hard ease of lacquered pine that clamps  
The shuffled fists into the breast and neck.

Time begins to elucidate her bones

Then you, so crazy and inviolate,  
Will finger the console with a fearful touch,  
Go past the horsehair sofa, the gilded frames  
Whose faces are tired names  
For the lifeblood that labors you so much.

## EMBLEMS

### I

Maryland, Virginia, Caroline  
Pent images in sleep  
Clay valleys rocky hills old fields of pine  
Unspeakable and deep

Out of that source of time my farthest blood  
Runs strangely to this day  
Unkempt the fathers waste in solitude  
Under the hills of clay

Far from their woe fled to its thither side  
To a river in Tennessee  
In an alien house I will stay  
Yet find their breath to be  
All that my stars betide—  
There some time to abide  
Took wife and child with me.

## EMBLEMS

### II

When it is all over and the blood  
Runs out, do not bury this man  
By the far river (where never stood  
His fathers) flowing to the West,  
But take him East where life began.  
O my brothers, there is rest  
In the depths of an eastward river  
That I can understand; only  
Do not think the truth we hold  
I hold the slighter for this lonely  
Reservation of the heart:  
Men cannot live forever  
But they must die forever  
So take this body at sunset  
To the great stream whose pulses start  
In the blue hills, and let  
These ashes drift from the Long Bridge  
Where only a late gull breaks  
That deep and populous grave.

## EMBLEMS

### III

By the great river the forefathers to beguile  
Them, being inconceivably young, carved out  
Deep hollows of memory on a river isle  
Now lost—their murmur the ghost of a shout

In the hollows where the forefathers  
Without beards, their faces bright and long,  
Lay down at sunset by the cool river  
In the tall willows amid birdsong;

And the long sleep by the cool river  
They've slept full and long, till now the air  
Waits twilit for their echo; the burning shiver  
Of August strikes like a hawk the crouching hare.

## SONNETS OF THE BLOOD

### I

What is the flesh and blood compounded of  
But a few moments in the life of time?  
This prowling of the cells, litigious love,  
Wears the long claw of flesh-arguing crime.  
Consider the first settlers of our bone,  
Observe how busily they sued the dust,  
Estopped forever by the last dusted stone.  
It is a pity that two brothers must  
Perceive a canker of perennial flower  
To make them brothers in mortality:  
Perfect this treason to the murderous hour  
If you would win the hard identity  
Of brothers—a long race for men to run  
Nor quite achieved when the perfection's won.

### II

Near to me as perfection in the blood  
And more mysterious far, is this, my brother:

### SONNETS OF THE BLOOD

A light vaulted into your solitude.  
It studied burns lest you its rage should smother.  
It is a flame obscure to any eyes,  
Most like the fire that warms the deepest grave  
(The cold grave is the deepest of our lies)  
To which our blood is the indentured slave:  
The fire that burns most secretly in you  
Does not expend you hidden and alone,  
The studious fire consumes not one, but two—  
Me also, marrowing the self-same bone.  
Our property in fire is death in life  
Flawing the rocky fundament with strife.

### III

Then, brother, you would never think me vain  
Or rude, if I should mention dignity;  
Think little of it. Dignity's the stain  
Of mortal sin that knows humility.  
Let me design the hour when you were born  
Since, if that's vain, it's only childlike so:  
Like an attempting frost on April corn  
Considerate death would hardly let you go.

## SONNETS OF THE BLOOD

Reckon the cost—if you would validate  
Once more our slavery to circumstance  
Not by contempt of a prescriptive fate  
But in your bearing towards an hour of chance.  
It is a part so humble and so proud  
You'll think but little of it in your shroud.

### IV

The times have changed. Why do you make a fuss  
For privilege when there's no law of form?  
Who of our kin was pusillanimous,  
A fine bull galloping into a storm?  
Why, none; unless you count it arrogance  
To cultivate humility in pride,  
To look but casually and half-askance  
On boots and spurs that went a devil's ride.  
There was, remember, a Virginian  
Who took himself to be brute nature's law,  
Cared little what men thought him, a tall man  
Who meditated calmly what he saw  
Until he freed his Negroes, lest he be  
Too strict with nature and than they less free.

## SONNETS OF THE BLOOD

### V

Our elder brother whom we had not seen  
These twenty years until you brought him back  
From the cyclonic West, where he had been  
Sent by the shaking fury in the track  
We know so well, wound in these arteries:  
You, other brother, I have become strange  
To you, and you must study ways to seize  
Mortality, that knows how to derange  
Corpuscles for designs that it may choose;  
Your blood is altered by the sudden death  
Of one who of all persons could not use  
Life half so well as death. Let's look beneath  
That life. Perhaps hers only is our rest—  
To study this, all lifetime may be best.

### VI

The fire I praise was once perduring flame—  
Till it snuffs with our generation out;  
No matter, it's all one, it's but a name  
Not as late honeysuckle half so stout;

## SONNETS OF THE BLOOD

So think upon it how the fire burns blue,  
Its hottest, when the flame is all but spent;  
Thank God the fuel is low, we'll not renew  
That length of flame into our firmament;  
Think too the rooftree crackles and will fall  
On us, who saw the sacred fury's height—  
Seated in her tall chair, with the black shawl  
From head to foot, burning with motherly light  
More spectral than November dusk could mix  
With sunset, to blaze on her pale crucifix.

## VII

This message hastens lest we both go down  
Scattered, with no character, to death;  
Death is untutored, with an ignorant frown  
For precious identities of breath.  
But you perhaps will say confusion stood,  
A vulture, near the heart of all our kin:  
I've heard the echoes in a dark tangled wood  
Yet never saw I a face peering within.  
These evils being anonymities,  
We fulminate, in exile from the earth,

## SONNETS OF THE BLOOD

Aged exclusions of blood memories—  
Those superstitions of explosive birth;  
Until there'll be of us not anything  
But foolish death, who is confusion's king.

### VIII

Not power nor the casual hand of God  
Shall keep us whole in our dissevering air,  
It is a stink upon this pleasant sod  
So foul, the hovering buzzard sees it fair;  
I ask you will it end therefore tonight  
And the moth tease again the windy flame,  
Or spiders, eating their loves, hide in the night  
At last, drowsy with self-devouring shame?  
Call it the house of Atreus where we live—  
Which one of us the Greek perplexed with crime  
Questions the future: bring that lucid sieve  
To strain the appointed particles of time!  
Whether by Corinth or by Thebes we go  
The way is brief, but the fixed doom, not so.

## SONNETS OF THE BLOOD

### IX

Captains of industry, your aimless power  
Awakens harsh velleities of time:  
Let you, brother, captaining your hour  
Be zealous that your numbers are all prime,  
Lest false division with sly mathematic  
Plunder the inner mansion of the blood,  
The Thracian, swollen with pride, besiege the Attic--  
Invader foraging the sacred wood:  
Yet the prime secret whose simplicity  
Your towering engine hammers to reduce,  
Though driven, holds that bulwark of the sea  
Which breached will turn unspeaking fury loose  
To drown out him who swears to rectify  
Infinity, that has nor ear nor eye.





## TRANSLATIONS

### THE VIGIL OF VENUS

(PERVIGILIUM VENERIS)

#### Introductory Note

Few people today read the *Pervigilium Veneris*, and I doubt that it was ever widely read. Those of us who had some of the classical education which was still more or less compulsory in the colleges twenty-five years ago, did not read it in the Latin classes. Late Latin of the Decadence did not appear conspicuously in undergraduate "courses," the purpose of which was to hold up models of "purity" in the language and not to explore the range of the Latin sensibility in poetry. I came upon the poem, I think in 1917, in the usual way, in *Marius the Epicurean*, where Pater gives us a somewhat overdone reconstruction of the circumstances of its origin. I looked up the Latin text and was disappointed. I was still too close to Swinburne in my adolescent revolt against his influence to read

properly any poem about pagan love; I read the *Pervigilium* with Swinburne's sensibility, and heard it in his language, having then at any rate neither sensibility nor language of my own; and I disliked it. I did not look at the poem again until 1930, when I tried to work out a translation of the famous refrain. My attempt at this failed.

I go into this personal history in order to say what is obvious, that most verse is written accidentally, translations not excepted. In the fall of 1942 the refrain of the *Pervigilium* came back to me and for several days kept running through my head; then I suddenly knew that I "had" it. I had it, that is to say, in language that somewhat resembled English and in a metre that the English language can be written in: plain iambic pentametre, with anapaestic substitutions for the frequent falling rhythms of the original. The Latin is in trochaic septenarii, seven-footed lines with, at the end, an extra syllable which is usually accented, making eight accents; the metre, in fact, of Tennyson's *Locksley Hall*, which was actually used by some of the early translators of the *Pervigilium*. Except for certain special purposes it is an impossible metre in

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

English, for unless the extra accented syllable at the end is managed with great skill the line will break down into units of four and three and sound like a Wesleyan hymn—a high price to pay for metrical fidelity to a foreign original.

The poem is supposed by some scholars to have been written as early as the reign of Hadrian (A. D. 117-138) by a man named Florus, who was better known as historian and rhetorician than as poet. This conjecture is based upon the scholars' feeling that the poem ought to have been written then, since under Hadrian the trinoctium of Venus, the spring ritual of the cult of Dione, or Venus Genetrix, whom the poem celebrates as the principle of sexual reproduction in nature, was officially encouraged and even given the dignity of a state religion. But certain features of the poem might place it much later, as late, perhaps, as the Fourth Century. The late J. W. Mackail saw in it "a certain affinity of style and spirit" with the *Eclogues* of Nemesianus of Carthage (cir. A.D. 285), and an even more striking resemblance to the fragments of Tiberianus, another African poet, who wrote around A.D. 350. If I were entitled to an opinion I should side with

Mackail, for although the simplified syntax and the stressed verse could have been written as early as Hadrian, it is not probable that they were: the language of the poem seems to stand midway between classical Latin and late vulgar Latin which toward the end of the empire began to show, in the levelling off of the inflectional system, the influence of the popular and provincial tongues. The reader of the *Pervigilium*, who has only a little Latin, as I have, will observe the occasional rhyme, the line unit of expression (rare in the poetry of the Golden Age), the frequent coincidence of quantity and stress, and even in some instances stress crowding out the quantities of the vowels.

The delicacy of feeling and the subtlety of the simple language require little demonstration. There is, of course, a good deal of merely conventional stuff, for which there is no equivalent convention in English; for example, the standard references to Venus as the founder of Rome. This material, brought into our language, had to be considerably doctored in the eighteenth-century manner to make it palatable at all. I have not found any scholar or previous translator who does justice to the restrained humor

of the lines about Cupid and the virgins. Up to the last two stanzas the poem is moving, it has its peculiar subtleties; but it is not brilliant. In those two last stanzas something like a first-rate lyrical imagination suddenly appears.

Observe how it works. The "maid of Tereus" is the sort of classical parable that we have had throughout the poem; but here it is not a conventional allusion. The beautiful line:

*iam loquaces ore rauco stagna cycni perstrepunt*  
particularizes the scene about to be presented as no other scene in the poem has been particularized: we feel immediately the presence of a dramatic observer, an ear that listens and an eye that sees. *Terei puella* is more than a classical allusion; she is a real bird singing in a real poplar tree, answering the dissonance of the swans as they strike the lake.

Is she Philomela or Procne, swallow or nightingale? Our anonymous poet is not explicit; yet in the next and last stanza he speaks of the swallow who has ceased to be silent and can now sing. We evidently have here the older Greek, not the later Latin, version of the story of the rape of Philomela, in which Procne becomes the nightingale, Philomela

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

he swallow. (It is perhaps significant that the poet uses the Greek *chelidon* instead of the Latin *hirundo* for swallow.) Countless versions of the tale circulated in the ancient world. The brief summary by Apollodorus, who collected in the Second Century B.C. virtually all the known Greek myths in a long work that comes down to us as *The Library*, gives the story as it must have been most widely known among the Greeks:

. . . and having with his help brought the war to a successful close he (Pandion) gave Tereus his own daughter Procne in marriage. Tereus had by her a son Itys, and having fallen in love with Philomela (sister to Procne), he seduced her also saying that Procne was dead, for he concealed her in the country. Afterward he married Philomela and bedded with her and cut out her tongue. But by weaving characters in a robe she revealed thereby to Procne her own sorrows. And having sought out her sister, Procne killed her son Itys, boiled him, and served him up for supper to the unwitting Tereus, and fled with her sister. . . . When Tereus was aware of what had happened, he snatched up an axe and pursued them. And being overtaken at Daulia in Phocis, they prayed the gods to be turned into birds, and Procne became a nightingale and Philomela a swallow.—(Apollodorus, *THE LIBRARY*, III, xiv: Loeb Classical Library, pp. 99-100.)

The late Sir J. G. Frazer, editor of the Loeb text of Apollodorus, says in a note on this passage: "The later Roman mythographers somewhat absurdly inverted the transformation of the two sisters, making Procne the swallow and the tongueless Philomela the songstress nightingale." While I was translating the *Pervigilium* I assumed that our poet had followed Ovid's version of the transformation, but upon looking up the story in the *Metamorphoses* (VI, 424-675) I found that I had not remembered Ovid accurately, for he does not tell us what kind of birds the sisters became; he merely says:

*corpora Cecropidum pennis pendere putares:  
pendebant pennis.*

Yet it must be confessed that the "internal evidence" in favour of the belief that the bird singing *subter umbram populi* is Philomela the swallow is not conclusive. If we translate *puella*, in the phrase *Terei puella*, in the rare sense of wife, the bird is Procne the nightingale; and we may only surmise that the poet, when he asks, *Quando fiam uti chelidon ut tacere desinam?* is hoping that he may become as the swallow companion to the nightingale. This

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

interpretation has, I think, little to recommend it; but the reader may take his choice.

The symbolic power of the scene in stanza XXI is firmly grounded in the dramatic perception of the poet, whose personality has not previously appeared. It appears explicitly in stanza XXII, where this long, gentle meditation on the sources of all life comes to a climax in the poet's sudden consciousness of his own feeble powers. When shall I, he says, like Philomela the swallow, suffer violence and be moved to sing? It is this unexpected and dramatic ending that makes, for me, what were otherwise an interesting ritualistic chant, one of the finest of lyric poems. Perhaps in the Amyclae, the people of the town of that name in Latium who were called *tacitae*, and who, when menaced by an enemy, could not speak for help and were destroyed, we may see an image of all "late" people. I like to think that the *Amyclae tacitae* were not Latians but lived in the Laconian town of that name, where Apollo was the tutelary deity under the surname Amyclaeus, and that having offended their god, the Laconian Amyclae were cursed with silence and died of their own emptiness of song. May we see something of this in the last

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

stanza of the poem? If there is any external evidence for it I have not been able to find it. Yet is the poem not telling us that the loss of symbolic language may mean the extinction of our humanity?

The text that I have followed is Mackail's, which was first published in 1888 and which now appears in the Loeb Classical Library. Mackail's arrangement of the corrupt text into quatrains is perhaps a triumph of textual scholarship. The poem comes down to us in two badly confused manuscripts in the *Anthologia Latina*, a miscellany of short poems of the Silver Age. In order to bring together material that seemed to go together, and to improve the continuity, I have shifted in several instances Mackail's order of the stanzas, a liberty that seemed justified by the corruption of the surviving texts; for no one knows the original order. Where I have moved a stanza I have indicated in brackets, in the Latin text, the number of the stanza in Mackail's arrangement. For the translation of the first line of stanza XXI I am indebted to my wife; and for constant criticism, to Robert Lowell.

MONTEAGLE, TENNESSEE

APRIL 27, 1943

A. T.

## PERVIGILIUM VENERIS

### I

Cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet:

ver novum, ver iam canorum, ver renatus orbis est;  
vere concordant amores, vere nubunt alites,  
et nemus comam resolvit de maritis imbribus.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

### II (III)

cras erit cum primus aether copulavit nuptias:  
tunc cruore de superno spumeo et ponti globo,  
caerulas inter catervas, inter et bipedes equos,  
fecit undantem Dionem de maritis imbribus.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

### I

Tomorrow let loveless, let lover tomorrow make love:  
O spring, singing spring, spring of the world renew!  
In spring lovers consent and the birds marry  
When the grove receives in her hair the nuptial dew.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

### II

Tomorrow's the day when the prime Zeus made love:  
Out of lightning foam shot deep in the heaving sea  
(Witnessed by green crowds of finny horses)  
Dione rising and falling, he made to bel

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow  
make love.

III (II)

cras amorum copulatrix inter umbras arborum  
implicat casas virentes de flagello myrteo:  
cras canoris feriatos ducit in silvis choros;  
cras Dione iura dicit fulta sublimi throno.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

IV

ipsa gemmis purpurantem pingit annum floridis;  
ipsa turgentes papillas de favoni spiritu  
urget in nodos tepentes; ipsa roris lucidi,  
noctis aura quem relinquit, spargit umentes aquas.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

V

emicant lacrimae trementes de caduco pondere,  
gutta praeceps orbe parvo sustinet casus suos:

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

### III

Tomorrow the Joiner of love in the gracious shade  
Twines her green huts with boughs of myrtle claws,  
Tomorrow leads her gangs to the singing woods: .  
Tomorrow Dione, on high, lays down the laws.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

### IV

She shines the tarnished year with glowing buds  
That, wakening, head up to the western wind  
In eager clusters. Goddess! You deign to scatter  
Lucent night-drip of dew; for you are kind.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

### V

The heavy teardrops stretch, ready to fall,  
Then falls each glistening bead to the earth beneath:

## PERVIGILIUM VENERIS

umor ille quem serenis astra rorant noctibus  
mane virgines papillas solvit umentis peplo.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## VI

en pudorem florulentae prodiderunt purpurae  
et rosarum flamma nodis emicat tepentibus.  
ipsa iussit diva vestem de papillis solvere,  
ut recenti mane nuda virgines nubant rosae.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## VII

facta Cypridis de cruore deque Amoris osculo,  
deque gemmis deque flammis deque solis purpuris,  
cras ruborem qui latebat veste tectus ignea  
uvido marita nodo non pudebit solvere.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

The moisture that the serene stars sent down  
Loosens the virgin bud from the sliding sheath.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

## VI

Look, the high crimsons have revealed their shame.  
The burning rose turns in her secret bed,  
The goddess has bidden the girdle to loose its folds  
That the rose at dawn may give her maidenhead.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

## VII

The blood of Venus enters her blood, Love's kiss  
Has made the drowsy virgin modestly bold;  
Tomorrow the bride is not ashamed to take  
The burning taper from its hidden fold.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

VIII

ipsa nymphas diva luco iussit ire myrteo:  
it puer comes puellis; nec tamen credit potest  
esse Amorem feriatum, si sagittas vexerit:  
ite nymphae, posuit arma, feriatuſ est Amor.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

IX

iussuſ est inermis ire, nudus ire iussus est,  
neu quid arcu neu sagitta neu quid igne laederet  
sed tamen cavete nymphae, quod Cupido pulcher  
est:  
totus est inermis idem quando nudus est Amor.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

X (XIV)

ruris hic erunt puellae vel puellae montium  
quaeque silvas quaeque lucos quaeque fontes  
incolunt:

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

### VIII

The goddess herself has sent nymphs to the woods,  
The Boy with girls to the myrtles; perhaps you think  
That Love's not truly tame if he shows his arrows?  
Go, girls! Unarmed, Love beckons. You must not  
shrink.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

### IX

Bidden unarmed to go and to go naked  
Lest he destroy with bow, with dart, with brand—  
Yet, girls, Cupid is pretty, and you must know  
That Love unarmed can pierce with naked hand!

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

### X

Here will be girls of the farm and girls of the  
mountain  
And girls who live by forest, or grove, or spring.

## PERVIGILIUM VENERIS

iussit omnes adsidere mater alitis dei,  
iussit et nudo puellas nil Amori credere.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## XI

ipsa vellet te rogare, si pudicam flecteret;  
ipsa vellet ut venires, si deceret virginem:  
iam tribus choros videres feriatos noctibus  
congreges inter catervas ire per saltus tuos.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## XII (X)

conpari Venus pudore mittit ad te virgines:  
una res est quam rogamus, cede virgo Delia,  
ut nemus sit incruentum de ferinis stragibus  
et recentibus virentes ducat umbras floribus.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

The mother of the Flying Boy has smiled  
And said: Now, girls, beware his naked sting!

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

### XI

Gently she asks may she bend virginity?  
Gently that you, a modest girl, may yield.  
Now, should you come, for three nights you would  
see  
Delirious bands in every grove and field.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

### XII

Venus herself has maidens as pure as you;  
So, Delia, one thing only we ask: Go away!  
That the wood shall not be bloody with slaughtered  
beasts  
When Venus flicks the shadows with greening spray.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

XIII (XII)

floreas inter coronas, myrteas inter casas,  
nec Ceres nec Bacchus absunt nec poetarum deus.  
de tenente tota nox est perviglanda canticis:  
regnet in silvis Dione, tu recede Delia.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

XIV (XIII)

iussit Hyblaeis tribunal stare diva floribus;  
praeses ipsa iura dicet, adsidebunt Gratiae:  
Hybla totos funde flores, quicquid annus adtulit;  
Hybla florum sume vestem, quantus Ennae campus  
est.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

XV

ut pater totum crearet veris annum nubibus  
in sinum maritus imber fluxit almae coniugis,

XIII

Among the garlands, among the myrtle bowers  
Ceres and Bacchus, and the god of verse, delay.  
Nightlong the watch must be kept with votive cry—  
Dione's queen of the woods: Diana, make way!

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

XIV

She places her court among the flowers of Hybla;  
Presiding, she speaks her laws; the Graces are near.  
Hybla, give all your blossoms, and bring, Hybla,  
The brightest plain of Enna for the whole year.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

XV

With spring the father-sky remakes the world:  
The male shower has flowed into the bride,

## PERVIGILIUM VENERIS

unde fetus perque pontum perque caelum pergeret  
perque terras mixtus omnes alere magno corpore.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

### XVI (XVII)

pervium sui tenorem seminali tramite  
perque caelum perque terras perque pontum  
subditum  
ipsa duxit, ipsa venis procreantem spiritum  
inbuit, iussitque mundum nosse nascendi vias.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

### XVII (XVI)

ipsa venas atque mentem permeanti spiritu  
intus occultis gubernat procreatrix viribus.  
ipsa Troianos nepotes in Latinos transtulit,  
Romuleas ipsa fecit cum Sabinis nuptias.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

Earth's body; then shifted through sky and sea and  
land

To touch the quickening child in her deep side.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

## XVI

Over sky and land and down under the sea  
On the path of the seed the goddess brought to  
earth

And dropped into our veins created fire,  
That men might know the mysteries of birth.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

## XVII

Body and mind the inventive Creatress fills  
With spirit blowing its invariable power:  
The Sabine girls she gave to the sons of Rome  
And sowed the seed exiled from the Trojan tower.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

XVIII

ipsa Laurentem puellam coniugem nato dedit,  
moxque Marti de sacello dat pudicam virginem,  
unde Ramnes et Quirites proque prole posterum  
Romulum patrem crearet et nepotem Caesarem.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

XIX

rura fecundat voluptas: rura Venerem sentiunt:  
ipse Amor puer Dionae rure natus creditur:  
hunc ager cum parturiret ipsa suscepit sinu,  
ipsa florum delicatis educavit osculis.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

XX .

ecce iam super genestas explicant tauri latus,  
quisque coetus continetur coniugali foedere:

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

### XVIII

Lavinia of Laurentum she chose to bed  
Her son Aeneas, and for the black Mars won  
The virgin Silvia, to found the Roman line:  
Sire Romulus, and Caesar her grandson.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

### XIX

Venus knows country matters: country knows Venus:  
For Love, Dione's boy, was born on the farm.  
From the rich furrow she snatched him to her breast,  
With tender flowers taught him peculiar charm.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

### XX

See how the bullocks rub their flanks with broom!  
See the ram pursue through the shade the bleating  
ewe,

## PERVIGILIUM VENERIS

subter umbras cum maritis ecce balantum gregem,  
et canoras non tacere diva iussit alites.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## XXI

iam loquaces ore rauco stagna cycni perstrepunt:  
adsonat Terei puella subter umbram populi,  
ut potes motus amoris ore dici musicos,  
at neges queri sororem de marito barbaro.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## XXII

illa cantat, nos tacemus: quando ver venit meum?  
quando fiam uti chelidon ut tacere desinam?  
perdidi musam tacendo, nec me Apollo respicit:  
sic Amyclas, cum tacerent, perdidit silentium.

cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras  
amet.

## THE VIGIL OF VENUS

For lovers' union is Venus in kind pursuit;  
And she tells the birds to forget their winter woe.

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

## XXI

Now the tall swans with hoarse cries thrash the lake:  
The girl of Tereus pours from the poplar ring  
Musical change—sad sister who bewails  
Her act of darkness with the barbarous king!

Tomorrow may loveless, may lover tomorrow make  
love.

## XXII

She sings, we are silent. When will my spring come?  
Shall I find my voice when I shall be as the swallow?  
Silence destroyed the Amyclae: they were dumb.  
Silent, I lost the muse. Return, Apollo!

Tomorrow let loveless, let lover tomorrow make  
love.

## FAREWELL TO ANACTORIA

(Sappho)

Never the tramp of foot or horse,  
Nor lusty cries from ship at sea,  
Shall I call loveliest on the dark earth—  
My heart moves lovingly.

I say that what one loves is best:  
The midnight fastness of the heart.  
Helen, you took the beauty of men  
With unpitying art!

White Paris from Idean hills  
For you the Trojan towers razed—  
Who swiftly ploughed the black seas  
Had on your white arm gazed!

Oh, how loving from afar  
Led you to grief, for in your mind  
The present was too light, as ever  
Among fair womankind. . . .

FAREWELL TO ANACTORIA

So, Anactoria, go you away  
With what calm carelessness of sorrow!  
Your gleaming footstep and your grace,  
    When comes another morrow,

Much would I rather then behold  
Than Lydian cars or infantry.  
I ask the lot of blessedness,  
    Belovèd, in memory.

## ADAPTATION OF A THEME BY CATULLUS

(From the translation by Aubrey Beardsley)

### *Carmen CI*

Past towns, states, deserts, hills and rivers borne  
By the first plane, brother, I've come today,  
A spirit, to linger at your spiritless clay  
That sleeps well-dressed beyond the reach of scorn:  
Not glad, lifeless tycoon, nor sorry feel  
For neither Bull nor Bear attends your way—  
Ah, vanity of speech, what should I say?  
The grave encloses you with technical zeal  
For Chance, swift giver, may just as swiftly take.  
Accept these costly wreaths for my own sake  
(Death asks no entrance fee to let you in)  
And for the decent sense of heaven and hell:  
Take them, and think not much on mortal sin.  
Now, brother, time being money, I say farewell.

## CORRESPONDENCES

(From the French of Charles Baudelaire)

All nature is a temple where the alive  
Pillars breathe often a tremor of mixed words;  
Man wanders in a forest of accords  
That peer familiarly from each ogive.

Like thinning echoes tumbling to sleep beyond  
In a unity umbrageous and infinite,  
Vast as the night stupendously moonlit,  
All smells and colors and sounds correspond.

Odors blown sweet as infants' naked flesh,  
Soft as oboes, green as a studded plain,  
—Others, corrupt, rich and triumphant, thresh

Expansions to the infinite of pain:  
Amber and myrrh, benzoin and musk condense  
To transports of the spirit and the sense!

## A CARRION

(From the French of Charles Baudelaire)

Remember now, my Love, what piteous thing  
We saw on a summer's gracious day:  
By the roadside a hideous carrion, quivering  
On a clean bed of pebbly clay,

Her legs flexed in the air like a courtesan,  
Burning and sweating venomously,  
Calmly exposed its belly, ironic and wan,  
Clamorous with foul ecstasy.

The sun bore down upon this rottenness  
As if to roast it with gold fire,  
And render back to nature her own largess  
A hundredfold of her desire.

Heaven observed the vaunting carcass there  
Blooming with the richness of a flower;  
And that almighty stink which corpses wear  
Choked you with sleepy power!

## A CARRION

The flies swarmed on the putrid vulva, then  
A black tumbling rout would seethe  
Of maggots, thick like a torrent in a glen,  
Over those rags that lived and seemed to breathe.

They darted down and rose up like a wave  
Or buzzed impetuously as before;  
One would have thought the corpse was held a slave  
To living by the life it bore!

This world had music, its own swift emotion  
Like water and the wind running,  
Or corn that a winnower in rhythmic motion  
Fans with fiery cunning.

All forms receded, as in a dream were still,  
Where white visions vaguely start  
From the sketch of a painter's long-neglected idyl  
Into a perfect art!

Behind the rocks a restless bitch looked on  
Regarding us with jealous eyes,  
Waiting to tear from the livid skeleton  
Her loosed morsel quick with flies.

A CARRION

And even you will come to this foul shame,  
This ultimate infection,  
Star of my eyes, my being's inner flame,  
My angel and my passion!

Yes: such shall you be, O queen of heavenly grace,  
Beyond the last sacrament,  
When through your bones the flowers and sucking  
grass  
Weave their rank cerement.

Speak, then, my Beauty, to this dire putrescence,  
To the worm that shall kiss your proud estate,  
That I have kept the divine form and the essence  
Of my festered loves inviolate!













